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IN THE FAR FUTURE...

There is still PCPP.

There is also, apparently, an endless supply of Games Workshop video games... that's it; that's really all the future is. But, thankfully, for every dozen or so shitty mobile games or z-tier PC release, we happen to get a good one. And with a quality title like Vermintide on the menu already, the upcoming Darktide – previewed this issue – has me more than a little bit excited.

In other news, that burgeoning Warframe addiction I spoke about last issue? Well, it didn't last, and the game that took over from it, well, that's fallen by the wayside too – but that's only because I've gone as far into Subnautica: Below Zero's story. I mean, I could just hang around building endless sea bases, but hey... Tarkov isn't going to escape from itself, and I am very definitely back on that bullshit as we speak.

I'm just not very good at, well, not dying and losing all my hard-won gear every second run. Maybe I should get back to that base-building in Subnautica?

David Hollingworth

Darktide has me more than a little bit excited.

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WARHAMMER 40,000: DARKTIDE

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Grab your torch and chainsword

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RIOT MOCKS VALORANT HACKERS, SAYS IT WILL BAN ANYONE WHO 'RIDES THE CHEAT BUS ON THE HIGHWAY TO HELL'

The salt is oh-so-real.

Riot's latest blogpost about Valorant reveals some of the lengths the developer is going to in order to combat cheaters. Even before the game was released, catching cheaters has been one of Riot's major priorities – not unreasonably, given how widespread cheating can be in competitive shooters.

Most remarkably, for the online First Strike tournament, Riot reviewed every single player account because "we needed to know who every player was [...] We had to make the precedents and rules almost as we went, deciding what exactly constitutes a disqualification, and how we'd handle those."

Matt 'K30' Paoletti is Riot's senior anti-cheat analyst, and reckons "we hit a decent mark, and have learned a ton for the next one."

It really is funny how much Paoletti dislikes cheaters. He describes queuing with cheaters as "rid[ing] the cheat bus on the highway to hell" before going on to describe it as an "expensive addiction." "Rank should be an indicator of your skill," intones Paoletti from the mountaintop, "and not your ability to pay for a service."

Hitman 3 DLC is 'definitely' coming, IO Interactive says

The Hitman trilogy is complete and work on a new James Bond game (which could also become a trilogy) is underway, but developer IO Interactive isn't done with Agent 47 just yet. Executive producer Forest Swartout Large told The Gamer that Hitman 3 DLC is coming, although it's not quite clear exactly what form it will take just yet.

Fortnite is getting a Gangnam Style emote because I guess it's 2012 again

If time means nothing in the current state of the world, I guess that can apply for infamous K-pop songs that are almost a decade old. Yup, Gangnam Style, the ludicrously popular hit from Psy, is going to be a new emote in Fortnite.

The tease came from none other than the official Korean Fortnite Twitter account last month.

Rust is getting delivery drones so your clan can be murder Amazon

Guns delivered by drone. What a world.

Survival game Rust is getting delivery via drone in the coming patch, due to release February 4th. Rust producer Alistair McFarlane posted a video to Twitter of the drones in action as they leave a central drone station and fly to nearby vending machines to retrieve purchases. "The terminals will only be accessible within safezone(s) – can not be player crafted," he said when explaining how it works.

Rust's vending machines are made and stocked by players, and this seems like an effort to let newer players pick up some much-needed gear in the safe zone before heading out into the game world. To me, though, all I can imagine is some Rust clan

becoming the fortified equivalent of murder Amazon. Making lots of cool stuff and then selling it to the highest bidders via vending machines. AK-47s delivered by air.

Rust is one of the biggest survival games out there, where players start with nothing and build their way up to technology like guns and now, apparently, delivery drones.

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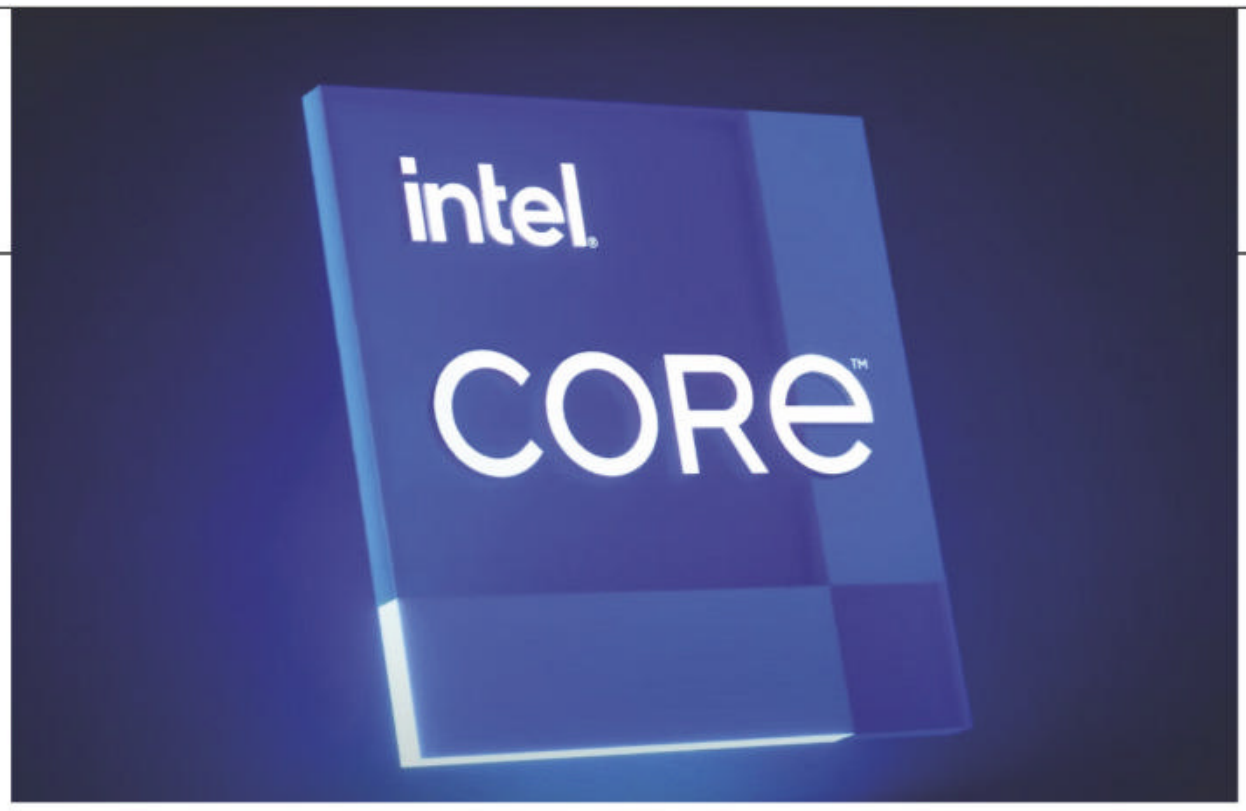
Corsair's wicked fast MP600 Pro Hydro X SSD comes with its own water block

The Hydro X variant comes with a water block attached to make it easy to slot into a liquid cooling loop "and achieve maximum performance." In theory, liquid cooling an SSD (and specifically the controller chip) should help maintain peak speeds for longer periods of time, before throttling kicks in (incidentally, Corsair intends to make available the Hydro X water block as a standalone purchase too, for use with any M.2 form factor SSD).

Activision refuses to adopt diverse hiring practices across the company

Activision Blizzard has called proposals to adopt the Rooney Rule, a policy requiring it interview at least one diverse candidate when hiring, "an unworkable encroachment" on its ability to do business, Motherboard reports. Established in 2003, the Rooney Rule is an NFL policy requiring teams interview at least one non-white, non-male candidate for coaching positions.



INTEL'S ROCKET LAKE IS LOOKING RED HOT... FOR ALL THE WRONG REASONS

Intel's 14nm swansong runs hot and hungry.

The top Intel Rocket Lake CPU runs at a red hot 98 degrees C and guzzles 250 watts. So says a post on Chiphell, which details the top Core i9 11900K model running a full stress test.

The chip was reported running at 4.8GHz all-core, which aligns with the best currently available information on what remains an unannounced, if imminent, new processor. The last of the 14nm line before Intel finally switches its desktop CPUs to 10nm.

The latest leak from motherboard maker MSI indicates the Core i9-11900K will run at 3.5GHz base clock, 5.1GHz Turbo, 5.2GHz Boost Max 3.0, and 5.3GHz Thermal Velocity Boost. That's modern CPUs for you. There's no such thing as a simple answer to the question of how fast they run.

Anyway, if 98 degrees and 250W sounds bad, the chip was reportedly running a full stress test rather than real-world apps. Intel's existing Comet Lake equivalent, the Core i9 10900K, has been recorded at 93 degrees and 235W running a stress test. Thus, Rocket Lake flirting with the 100 degree barrier wouldn't be entirely unprecedented.

Leaked benchmarks put Nvidia RTX 3080 Ti GPU within a whisker of RTX 3090

Rumoured GPU is back, this time with detailed specs and benchmarks.

A hefty cache of alleged benchmarks for the rumoured Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080 Ti 20GB have been released. The numbers from Chinese 'tuber Big Hardware Player and spotted by Twitter user HXL place the mooted card between the existing RTX 3080 and 3090 boards, but closer to the range-topping megabucks RTX 3090.

The alleged leak includes GPU-Z grabs showing the card with 20GB of memory running over the same 320-bit bus as an RTX 3080 but the same 10,496 Cuda core, 112 ROP and 328 texture unit counts as the RTX 3090. Core and boost clocks are again the same as the 3090, though the RTX 3080 Ti's memory clock is the slightly slower 1,188MHz of the RTX 3080 rather than the 3090's 1,219MHz.

The source suggests the board could be branded either RTX 3080 Ti or RTX 3080 Super. But the benchmarks include RTX 3080 and RTX 3090 boards as reference points, all running at 4K. Given that the specs of the rumoured card match the RTX 3090 bar slightly less memory bandwidth (and a drop from 24GB to 20GB of VRAM), it's no surprise to find the RTX 3080 Ti is only just behind the 3090.

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COLD FEET

January 2021 saw an unexpected development: a fan-made mod surpassed Fallout 76 as the most embarrassing Fallout game ever made...

James Cottee has never lusted after a Deathclaw.

Fallout: The Frontier was in production for seven long years. A mod for Fallout: New Vegas the size of a full AAA release, its feature set was impressive: three huge playable campaigns, new weapons, full voice acting, and driveable, heavily-armed vehicles.

Given that it was built on the ancient New Vegas engine, The Frontier was an impressive technical achievement – but it had no other redeeming features.

Its overall tone was uneven, thanks in part to the lead writers of the three campaigns communicating very little with each other. The primary NCR quest-line was a shameless rip-off of Call of Duty, and while the modder responsible was clearly a master of scripting code, scripting dialogue wasn't exactly his forte.

Every single aspect of The Frontier felt incongruous. Tone deaf. There are too many ridiculous elements to list here, but they include: a previously undiscovered race of drug and sex-obsessed Unity Asset Store lizard people, a young lady who likes to draw hentai, Kanye West lyrics, hackneyed dream sequences, dopey-looking motorised chariots, and corny lines ripped directly from Metal Gear Solid V.

Granted, pop culture references and adult content have been part of the Fallout experience since the 90s, but they're handled so ham-fistedly in this mod that any sense of immersion is ruined.

One of the bigger sticking points was the optional romantic encounter where you can have sex with a Deathclaw. This was apparently only intended to be accessible with the Wild Wasteland perk, leading to some confusion when it turned out that all players could, er, enjoy it. It was apparently supposed to be a bit of a joke, but this intent did not translate to the finished product. A lot of players concluded that it was coded in by someone who was earnestly and unironically very randy for Deathclaws. Anyone who has spent any amount of time on the internet knows all too well that this is entirely possible.

The foot fetish and emotional abuse content were also contentious, but the biggest jaw-dropper was something that happened completely outside of the game. An art contributor had made and uploaded some pornographic drawings of a sickening nature. You'd never guess it from his actual contributions to the mod, but suffice it to say these abominable scribbles were so repulsive that the mod team expelled and disavowed him, and are currently in the process of purging all his work.

The mod's launch was an utter disaster, and it's already been taken down from the Nexus Mods website. The devs have promised that all controversial content will be expunged. Considering that some contributors, including voice actors, have asked for all their work to be stricken from the project as well, it could be some time before gamers can enjoy an adequately sanitised edition.

In short, Fallout: The Frontier is a train wreck. A tragedy. But could anything have prevented it? Probably not. The creators were all volunteers, donating their expertise and thousands of hours of their time to a passion project. Contrast this with the employees (or, increasingly, contractors) of a game development company, who are paid not only to complete their work, but to complete it to a certain quality standard.

For the salary-man wears a figurative explosive slave collar around his neck – it's called a mortgage. He might sneak in a sly Star Trek reference or two, but he would never dare include anything in his work that could jeopardise his job.

"He who pays the piper calls the tune." It follows, then, that "He who accepts submissions from volunteer pipers must expect a certain amount of erotic fan-fiction."

One of the many, many quibbles gamers had with The Frontier was that it featured an Avengers-style floating aircraft carrier. While this would be possible given the tech level of Fallout's sci-fi setting, it still felt a little forced. Quite frankly, it was ridiculous.

One game that keeps aircraft carriers in the ocean where they belong is Carrier Command 2.

A sequel 33 years in the making (we will politely ignore Bohemia Interactive's mediocre Carrier Command: Gaea Mission), Carrier Command 2 will soon be published by the new-and-improved MicroProse. The return of this beloved publishing brand is another unexpected development of the 2020s, and a passion project we hope will have a more positive impact on our hobby than the dysfunctional subcultures of elephantine mod development.

Recent events have demonstrated that in the future, just about anything is possible – maybe even a return of superb action simulation games. Let us hope for the best.

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ROME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

Almost certainly not the worst, pun-based title for an article about CivCity: Rome.

Retrogaming; the fervent and irrational pursuit of a nostalgic experience, especially when your modern operating system won't play nice (or other, unknown, logistical complications occur). Somehow, games from 2006 are now included in my definition, so you'll just have to feel old alongside me, even if you're 25. Yes, I had that periodic, overwhelming urge to play (the ridiculously, but nonetheless accurately, named) CivCity: Rome. I found a copy on Steam, so I was lulled into the false sense that things might actually be OK. They weren't. It was $3.

But first, some backstory. CivCity: Rome's reviews (at release) were, at best (and as my grandmother would have said in a disapproving tone), 'middling'; 67 on Metacritic. Most mentioned the incongruous British accents, the fact that every shop looked alike, clumsy aqueducts and some snide use of the phrase, "Rome wasn't built in a day." I loved it, of course. It's like, your little blokes cut trees, which disappear appropriately. The planks become beds which blokes carry home (but only during their allocated free time) to improve their houses, and so on.

This means that every piece of this complex, dynamic puzzle can be clearly observed, as your city grows. It's what they said SimCity (2014) would be, although it wasn't. It's incredibly gratifying to see every moving part, mesmerising even. This is something people appreciate more in 2020, as a quick scan of Steam reviews would suggest. In fact, literally every negative review, without exception, mentions only one thing; sometimes workers just refuse to work. I have spent the best part of a month trying to figure out why, because it's utterly unplayable.

Even worse, I can play it, but in a maddening sometimes 'yes', sometimes 'no', kind of a way. I've struggled to the sixth scenario out of sheer bloodyminded, retrogaming pique. Each time a group of workers takes unscheduled leave and decides to do chin-ups forever in their shack, perhaps the fisher blokes, or the blokes who press olives, the entire chain of production is disrupted in a way that is initially imperceptible. Houses aren't upgrading. That's because the bakers aren't working, no, the millers, no, the blokes at the dock haven't unloaded the flour.

In fact, it was during this 'bread situation', that I started to doubt my sanity, and whether this bug was real. Telling the Steam forum your blokes are lazy starts arguments between aggravated sympathisers and those who think you're, "an idiot". I would have bet my first born child that the dock blokes were bugged but they were actually just a bit too far away from a warehouse with available space for the flour to be unloaded. Apparently, they can't deliver it directly to the mill. But what of the goat herders who bug out at the beginning of the chain, right next to an empty granary?

The bug is real. If I catch it early, I can (maybe) load, delete or cheese my way around the problem. At other times, I have to restart the level. Probably the most annoying thing about this whole discussion is that I actually enjoyed the process of restarting. Googling the issue taught me how to play, as well as addressing some egregious gaps in tutorialisation. But, by only the sixth scenario, most blokes are bugged most of the time. And now I (very intimately) understand the Steam review that consists entirely of a couple of hundred random letters and numbers.

The worst thing about retrogames is that I want to play them. Internet consensus about why CivCity: Rome is now so broken appears to be "Windows 10", despite compatibility workarounds not working for me (like so many blokes in vineyards, citrus farms and literally every other location). I now have a greater appreciation for retrogamers who maintain Commodore 64s and the like. But what do I need? The dead PC from 2006 which may still be under my house? Incredibly, I almost want to play this intricate puzzle enough to go and dust it off...

Meghann O'Neill is surprised that women (and children) in CivCity: Rome appear to be possessions; belonging to blokes of higher classes, as they accrue more gear for their houses. And their dialogue seems to be entirely comprised of complaints and demands. Old games. To be re-experienced at your peril, for more reasons than just the bugs.

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Special Report

PCPP INVESTIGATES

Tourist tip: download a boat mod so you can get views like this.

HOBBIT FORMING

This team dedicated ten years to building Middle-earth in MINECRAFT

The *Minecraft* community continues to blow minds with its incredible builds, but even in that lofty company Minecraft Middle-earth stands out. This block-by-block recreation of JRR Tolkein's world has to be seen to be believed.

All of Middle-earth's top hot-spots – and everything else – has been recreated in the blocky sandbox. You can take a quiet stroll through Hobbiton, delve into the depths of Moria, and so much more. Ever wanted to swan dive off the apex of Minas Tirith? I've done it – it's awesome.

Minecraft Middle-earth celebrated its ten-year anniversary last month, so I spoke with the server's founder Nicky Vermeersch, also known as q220, about its humble beginnings and why anyone in their right mind would take on such an ambitious build.

Vermeersch was first introduced to *Minecraft* when it was still in beta in 2009, and like many others who played early on in the game's development, he was completely captivated. As a moderator on a Dutch *Minecraft* server, the idea of building Middle-earth was a concept that quickly began to float around the server's community.

"I grew up with Lord of the Rings, like most people around 30 years old I imagine," Vermeersch says. "We had people who were interested from the *Minecraft* forums, so we had this solid player base to start with. We began building the basic locations, like Bree and Hobbiton, then after publishing screenshots, people got hooked on what we were doing and started joining the project."

Recreating an entire fantasy world inside a sandbox back in 2009 was far from an easy task, especially as the team didn't have many of the tools that builders have today. Software such as Dynmap, WorldPainter, and WorldMachine are now vital for planning, but for the Minecraft Middle-earth builders, much of what they've achieved was done freestyle.

"Looking back it was chaos," Vermeersch says. "Those tools didn't exist, so it was people running around and counting blocks. It was very much like 'Oh, yeah, we have to do this' and 'that has to go over there'. That was a disaster, really. Building Hobbiton was OK, but when we had to bridge the distances between major locations it became more of a problem."

WORLD BUILDING

Over the past ten years, the Middle-earth team has grown from a modest forum group to having around 300 members who are actively building and supporting the server. The process of researching and recreating an accurate representation of Tolkien's world requires the input of the whole community. "The biggest, most iconic

New build

Modern *Minecraft* builders begin their projects on a customisable map, choosing a flat terrain for easy building. But the Middle-earth team didn't have that in 2009, so had to start with a fully landscaped world which they carved away at. If a mountain happened to be in the way, the builders would remove it block by block ("which was really labour intensive").

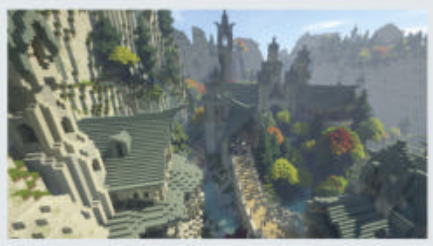
Hobbit forming

FAR LEFT: Gondor's largest city, Minas Tirith, in all its blocky glory.

UPPER LEFT: I totally got lost on the server more than once.

LOWER LEFT: I climbed all the way to the top of Isengard and didn't break a sweat.

VIRTUAL TOUR *My top four must-see locations to visit in Minecraft Middle-earth*



RIVENDELL
If you're wondering where the very precious one ring is, you'll find it here at the Council of Elrond.

HELM'S DEEP
The server lets you set the time and weather so you can recreate dramatic scenes like the Battle for Helm's Deep.

THE MINES OF MORIA
The mines are difficult to navigate but worth it for a special appearance waiting for you at its exit.

HOBBITON
Aww, Hobbiton, as charming and delightful as in the books and films. Is it time for second breakfast yet?

builds are usually handled exclusively by senior members or our best builders," Vermeersch says. "We then organise build contests, basically, where everyone can be involved. We set it in a blank world and ask, for example, for houses in Minas Tirith and people begin building. We give them guidelines and present them with pictures of like, for example, Roman architecture, as kind of a mood board. Then we look around at the builds and find out what works and what doesn't work."

The references the team use are the descriptions from the books and scenes from the films, but Vermeersch also says the group use their own fantasy concepts to fill vast parts of the map that Tolkien only alludes to.

"Mordor is a good example," Vermeersch says. "It's going to be really tough since we'll also have to make up unique assets that haven't been shown anywhere on the map. Gondor was another place that needed more. In the movies, you only get introduced to it as that huge white city and the broken ruins, but it's so much more than that. We have Pelargir which is a huge commerce port that isn't introduced in the movies, and if you visit it, there are tons of individual houses and all of them are built by hand."

"YOU CAN TAKE THE EXACT SAME PATH AS THE FELLOWSHIP TOOK TO GET TO MORDOR."

Minecraft Middle-earth was live when the Hobbit trilogy released between 2012-2014, and I ask Vermeersch if the server got excited to see new parts of Tolkein's world visualised. "When the first Hobbit got released, we saw a huge increase in visits for people," he says. "But we hadn't really built anything that appeared in The Hobbit except for a couple of places like The Shire or Rivendell. So of course, we had to disappoint a lot of people.

"The Hobbit actually takes place in a different location, so we haven't built areas like Lake-town or the location where the Battle of the Five Armies happens. That kind of stuff we haven't touched yet."

The Minecraft Middle-earth map is currently 29,000 by 30,000 blocks, which makes an area of around 870 square kilometres. That's around the same size as Dallas, Texas, so it's understandable that the team might not want to tackle the wider realms of Tolkien's universe quite yet. If you did want an itinerary of what to see in Middle-earth, the server has the perfect tour for you.

"When you head out into The Shire at the server's spawn point, you'll find footsteps on the ground," Vermeersch says. "It's a guideline. You can go out and take the exact same path as The Fellowship took to get to Mordor. Sometimes it branches, which indicates where The Fellowship split up and you can choose who to follow."

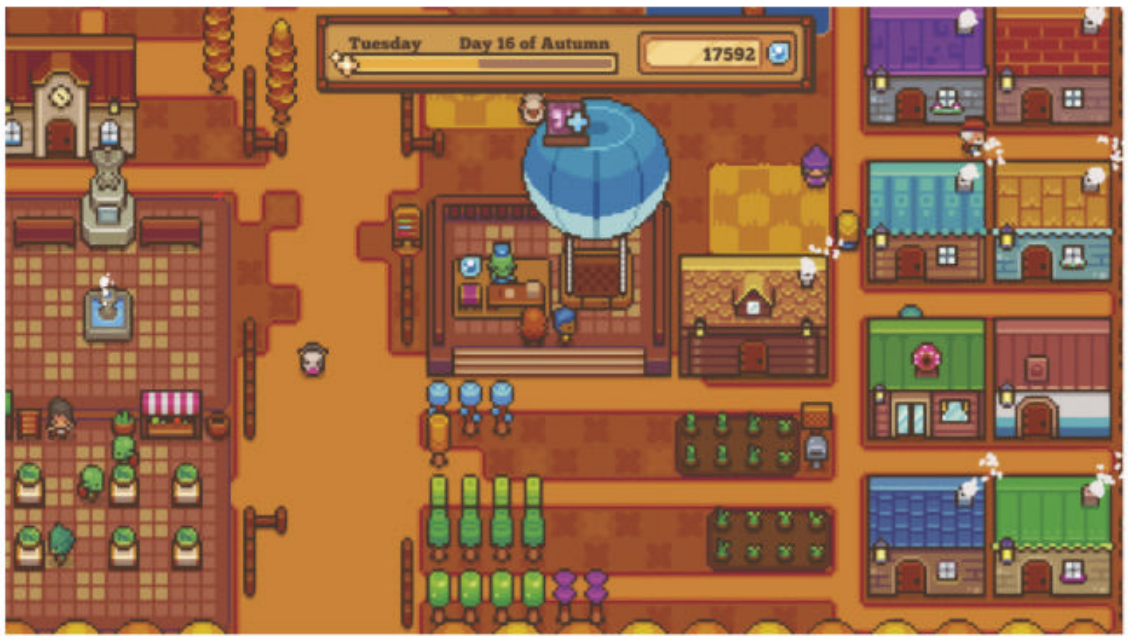
Even after ten years working on the server, the Minecraft Middle-earth team shows no signs of slowing down. It's a mind-boggling server and is a prime example of how players are using the sandbox in incredible ways. You can check out the server for free by heading over to the team's official website, or if you're feeling generous you can donate to help the team run things. ■

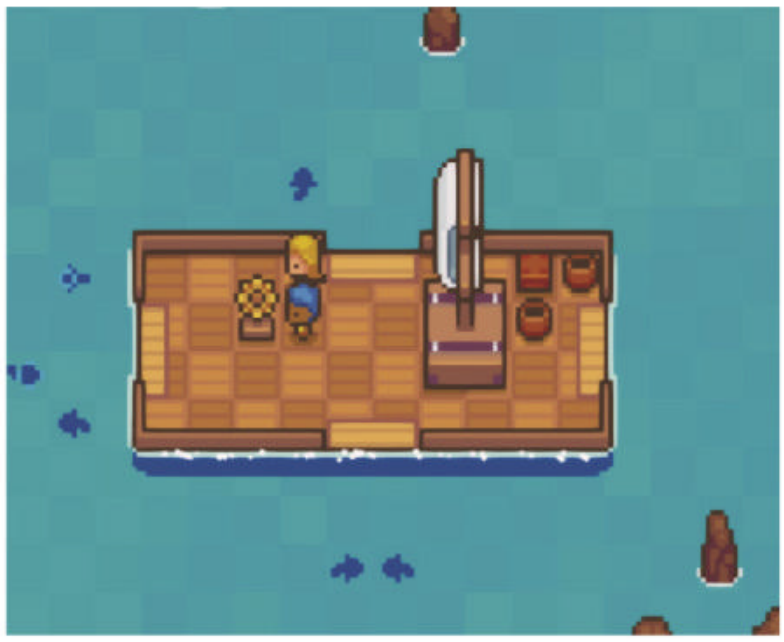
Rachel Watts

A collection aside

A COLLECTION ASIDE

2020 was a decent enough year for MEGHANN O'NEILL in many ways, at least in comparison to how many others experienced it. She did find that (after working remotely and sitting at the computer all day) she did not want to sit (in the same place) and play games during her precious little down time, for perhaps the first time ever. When not explicitly reviewing for PCPP, she took up knitting. Scary! Thankfully, a few weeks break has set her to rights, and she's back to obsessively exploring the most lengthy, difficult and nostalgic titles to be found. We hope you'll find something in this collection that will allow you to enjoy a well-deserved rest.





LITTLEWOOD

DEVELOPER Sean Young **PRICE** $21.50 **AVAILABILITY** Released

WEBSITE https://store.steampowered.com/app/894940/Littlewood/

2020 was tough for everyone, in divergent ways. I'm still employed, but teaching online has been hard. I've developed a real aversion to a myriad of unavoidable tasks, especially the time consuming or mundane. Oddly enough, Littlewood is full of tasks, but the fact that everything is optional is an important distinction. It's the difference between needing to record more lesson content and deciding whether to chop wood or go fishing, for three days straight. According to my achievements, I've cheerfully repeated chores a frightening number of times in this game.

You've saved the world, although you can't remember doing so. Your companions can recall details of your fight with The Dark Wizard, but are reluctant to talk about it. Seasons will pass in ignorance. You're still (kinda) the hero of an RPG, even if you're just building a peaceful town. Every time you talk to someone, or pull a carrot out of the ground, you gain experience in that relationship or skill. The coffee shop provides buffs and the story progresses (in lightly intriguing ways) over time. You're firmly retired, but old habits die hard, I guess.

The characters are delightful and you meet them incrementally as the world opens up. Many will ask you to build them a house in Littlewood, too, so you can talk with them every day, or even fall in love. There's a girl who has a crush on you, a silly sidekick, a wise mentor and various other fantasy archetypes; clumsy orcs, chaotic wizards and so on. One townsperson is surprising and incongruous, in a way that hints at a deeper story arc. For at least the first year of the game, chatting with people is merely a charming way to unlock more things to build.

I imagine you'll look at these screenshots and compare Littlewood to Stardew Valley, but I'd say that these production chains are significantly more intertwined. For example, I have sheep, who eat various vegetables and fruits I may be growing (which can also be used to cook a range of meals). When the sheep are fed, they produce fleece, which are used to craft items including hammocks and plushies, or attract special merchants to the marketplace. Interacting with farm animals provides boosts to the Farming statistic, allowing you to grow more difficult crops.

My initial, self-directed goal was to unlock all of the locations you can explore from the hot air balloon platform. The first available locations are the Endless Forest and Dust Cavern; with procedurally-generated levels, in which to randomly meet wanderers and grind for raw materials. Danger (in the form of roving monsters) is light, humorous and slightly infuriating. By contrast, in Littlewood, I quickly arranged my entire town around a comfortable daily routine, to minimise walking, with my mailbox, orchard, crops, coffee shop and girlfriend's house close by.

Littlewood always moves forward in the ways that you choose. As my husband said (every time I complained about completing a tiny increment of teaching work in 2020), "You're not going backwards." It seems silly to think that PC Powerplay could be an obscure record of The Covid Era, but I've naturally related every game I've played to it, over the last year. Perhaps future gamers will need to be reminded of what life was like under lockdown, in a way that's similar to Dalton's baffling retellings of battles with dune worms and dragons, over an evening's fishing in the lake.

RING OF PAIN

DEVELOPER Simon Boxer and Twice Different **PRICE** $28.95 **AVAILABILITY** Released

WEBSITE https://ringofpain.com/

There will be a moment, in Ring of Pain, where you decide to stop fleeing to the nearest exit and stand your ground. It happened, for me, around my 30th run. I'd since met enough incrementally horrifying monsters to understand that cowardice can lead only to failure. You'll go down fighting many more times after this realisation, yet stoically refusing to be weak is your only hope to start snowballing. Everything has to go well, but in a way that is much less dependent on good luck that I'd initially imagined. This is exquisitely designed, but it takes time to appreciate.

You awaken in a dark place. The owl encourages you to follow the light and bestows useful, statistic-boosting items when you find him in his nest. Soon enough, you'll meet a second character, with an opposing suggestion for how to proceed. Within each ring of cards, there are multiple exits you can navigate to. Many cards are monsters and the consequence of each possible action is shown before you choose it, revealing exactly how many hit points you (and they) might lose on attack, or if your attempt at stealth is unsuccessful.

Indeed, with horrors ranging from simple rats to poisonous, loot-gobbling jelly-behemoths, you must know who not to engage, even after you understand how valuable each harvested soul will become. The death of any creature (including if they're incredibly cute and lovely) will provide souls, as will robbing graves. Souls unlock chests (for more stat-boosting items) and allow for some incredible, late-game magic. Managed carefully, use of souls allows you to confidently stalk those terrible cards that once stalked you because, believe me, cards are mobile.

Some will chase, some will escape, some will attack from afar, some will explode and take anything flammable down with them. As you start to discover dungeons, you'll know which exits to take and which to avoid. You'll also become familiar with increasingly more treasure. It's possible to reroll chests to find that special item you are looking for, often at the expense of souls. My current strategy involves risking everything to boost statistics in the early game, then harvesting as many souls as I dare, as I search for what I believe I will need to win.

Is there one way to win? No. I have several ideas. Based on collecting cards for your deck, I don't think it even becomes possible to win until you have died a great many times. I love games that feel impossible, because the journey to mastery feels monumental. Given how difficult I found even glimpsing the possibility of winning the game, I was surprised to learn that the "near ending" achievement had been gained by 75% of players. Ring of Pain is challenging, but in a way that encourages you to try again, while it is making you stronger.

Even if you beat it once, there's more to do. An experience like this is rarely truly conquered. I have a great love of weird items in games, too, like the Jar of Eyeballs which boosts your Clarity statistic. Explicit storytelling is sparse, so a narrative is constructed from your interpretation of everything you find. I'm particularly intrigued by the monsters who look like they were once human, or once part of a human, like the Leaking Bilebag. And most bemused by the one (and only) creature who doesn't look altered at all.

Hurt them, before they hurt you.

A collection aside

THE WIND AND WILTING BLOSSOM

DEVELOPER Picklefeet Games **PRICE** $28.95 **AVAILABILITY** Released **WEBSITE** http://picklefeetgames.com/wind-wilting-blossom/

After Ring of Pain, and also being of roguelike structure, The Wind and Wilting Blossom's difficulty settings were a welcome change. I started on easy. It reminds me of other games; Heroes of Might and Magic, Curious Expedition, 80 Days, Ticket to Earth, Where the Water Tastes Like Wine, FTL and so on. With a rich story, gentle branching, turn-based combat and weighty decision-making, it is all of what I wanted to play in one, neat package. It's set as an alternate Japanese history and it is like playing inside of a beautifully illustrated storybook.

You traverse maps to their exits, but can't visit every location, due to the wave of evil magic on your tail. Food is consumed with every move and hunger will slow you down, trigger battles and other events. Additional resources, like coins and ki, must be carefully managed in order to ensure you have the strongest army, weaponry and flexibility, at all times. New units, food, healing and more can be won during quests and random encounters, or purchased from shops, as marked on your map. Often, navigating to a shop will take you dangerously off course.

The battlefield is not as similar to HOMM as it may look from screenshots. Firstly, each unit can move and attack in the same turn. Given that treasure and dropped coins won't persist beyond defeating the last enemy, collecting can be as valid an option as attack. Also, as units don't heal after battles, you may want to protect the damaged, while the stronger units fight, hoping to heal at an inn, or by other means, later. Weather effects, which you can see in advance, on the map, also complicate the battlefield with lightning strikes, earthquakes and more.

There's lots of variety to combat. An enemy will have to deplete your armour before they can hit you, unless they have a bleeding attack. A large opponent may be able to knock you back. There's a fascinating part-woman, part-flaming wheel, who explodes on death, leaving fire on hexes. Archers are mobile, so rushing them isn't always a great option. By the end game sequence, I always felt weak, outnumbered and at the mercy of luck. Apart from the occasional mistake caused by aspects of the UI being obscured, I enjoyed it being necessary to "play perfectly."

I'm a firm believer in the idea that games don't have to be explicitly innovative to be worth playing. The Wind and The Wilting Blossom is more an amalgamation of ideas, for those who want thoughtfully crafted, turn-based strategy and roguelike experiences, with an engaging story and choices to make. In comparison to Ring of Pain, many aspects of play do seem to be somewhat more based on luck, which can be both exciting and frustrating. I'd suggest learning to play on the easier difficulties, so that you can make informed decisions when it counts.

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A collection aside

LOCO MOTIVE

DEVELOPER Robust Games **PRICE** Name Your Own Price. (Including free.) **AVAILABILITY** Released

WEBSITE https://robustgames.itch.io/loco-motive

In other Covid news, we were on the road to Adelaide for the holidays (as usual) when the Avalon outbreak suddenly forced us into self isolation for 14 days. We ended up for Christmas at my parents' house (still in NSW) for the first time since the era in which large, wrapped game boxes magically appeared under the tree. It'd usually be an adventure, but which series? King's Quest, Space Quest? LucasArts? My dad would spend the morning installing whatever it was, and cooking lunch, then snooze while I explored my new world, in peace.

I remember Kings Quests 3 and 4 as being the pinnacle of "open world" adventuring, with seemingly endless locations and secrets to discover. Do I miss adventures which were expansive enough to cram in every fairytale character from Rumplestiltskin to Baba Yaga? Sure. But I also love when contemporary adventures simply lean into a couple of key themes. They're condensed nostalgia. They don't have to be everything, just something. Like Loco Motive; an enjoyable, 20-minute long mystery, full of tropes, laughs and a handful of puzzles.

You're on a luxury train, in 1939, as the estate lawyer to a wealthy, aging heiress. The first thing I noticed is that the music is built on motifs that reference a train horn. It's perfect, especially alongside art deco stylings and casual slang from the period. Your initial task takes you through three carriages, where you'll meet a procession of soon-to-be-suspicious characters, including the snide sleazeball and doctor with a menacing name. The heiress changes her last will and testament, you fumble the document and the train goes through a dark tunnel ...

My favourite puzzle involved noticing a detail in a passenger's story and connecting it to my experience of growing up with close friends who are identical twins. My friends would roll their eyes at this puzzle, so hard. I also loved the obligatory, self-observant, adventure game humour, like when you put a glass of red wine into your pocket and say, "I hope this suit isn't a rental." I didn't get stuck (I don't have time for being stuck in 2020.) Loco Motive is simply a neat reminder of the wondrous, Christmas adventures I took as a child, without any of the struggle.

Browsing the game's credits, I noticed that it was made with an interesting Unity tool called PowerQuest, published by Powerhoof, who made games like Crawl and Regular Human Basketball. It's free to use and there's a tutorial by Dave Lloyd which, frankly, I found mesmerising. I'm now considering using this to create a game with one of my tertiary composition classes in 2021. Students are often averse to detailed coding, but the structure (including dialogue, sprites, animation and so on) is cleverly organised and explained.

I looked through the catalogue of PowerQuest games, mostly made by Lloyd and collaborators, like Jacob Janerka of Paradigm. A couple even release with source code. Even their names, like The Inanimate Mr Coatrack and You're Watching Icebox are intriguing. Although they're very different now, I feel like adventure games grew up with me. Thanks to Covid, my holiday is turning out to be very different this year. Thanks to these bite-sized, 'name your own price' adventures, I still got exactly the presents I wanted.

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Warhammer 40,000: Darktide

LIGHT IT UP

WARHAMMER 40,000: DARKTIDE is coming, so grab your torch and chainsword

By Fraser Brown

Warhammer 40,000: Darktide

After more than five years surrounded by *Vermintide*'s skittering, shrieking Skaven, Fatshark has jumped into the grimdark future of Warhammer 40,000. *Darktide* pits another four brave souls against unrelenting waves of monstrous enemies in a city being corrupted by the power of Chaos. It's a meat grinder, but you get to be the teeth, chewing through hordes, leaving nothing but dismembered body parts in your bloody wake. And this time, there are chainswords.

There was a teaser trailer in July last year, but since then Fatshark hasn't given much away about its next co-op outing. Chatting to the team, it's clear they're being careful about what exactly they reveal at what is still a fairly early stage. They want to keep some surprises, but there's also much that's still up in the air. They're asking themselves a lot of questions about *Darktide*'s final form.

"We are still iterating on it and still trying to find our feet," says Fatshark co-founder Martin Wahlund. "It's all about the fun factor and getting it right, and getting the feeling right. We want to welcome *Vermintide* players, but we also want to make sure that everyone who hasn't played them is just as welcome, and we need to onboard them in a good way."

What is clear is that *Darktide* expands on *Vermintide* rather than completely reinventing it. You charge into missions with three friends, slaughter your way through enemies – with occasional breaks for some problem solving – and over the course of your misadventures you grow stronger, get better equipment, and maybe tart yourself up with some cosmetic flourishes. Within that familiar routine, however, Fatshark is tinkering away and planning some significant changes, with seemingly every little system being put under the microscope.

GRIM TIDINGS

The setting, of course, necessitates some of these changes. This is the far-flung future, so there's fancy tech, guns everywhere, and gargantuan hive cities that house billions of people. But this is still a universe with knights who wade into battle with swords and shields. There's a

The humble guardsman is the lasgun-toting backbone of the Imperium's army.

"AS WE'VE SEEN IN VERMINTIDE, PLAYERS REALLY ENJOY TWEAKING THEIR LOADOUTS"

HIVE TOURS

It's a prime holiday destination – just ask Nurgle

1 HABZONES
The hive's billions live in the habzones, where you might even find some survivors holding out against the tide of Nurgle's abominations.

2 WALKWAYS
If you want an idea of the scale of the hive, why not visit one of our gothic, picturesque bridges and walkways. Don't look down.

3 MARKET
Come to the underground water market to admire the uplifting graffiti and cheery atmosphere. It's probably even nicer now that Nurgle's moved in.

4 SERVICE TUNNELS
Why not explore the guts of the hive? Though the weather isn't great – we'll warn you, an umbrella doesn't protect you from acid rain.

5 PRISON
Don't forget to be on your best behaviour. The Imperium isn't delicate when it comes to upholding the law. Hence all the blood stains.

medieval fantasy element amid the gun-toting sci-fi, which means there's the potential for a lot more flexibility.

"We want to make it possible for players to play in more ways," says Wahlund. "So we're going to have way more customisation than we had in *Vermintide*. We work in a lot of that, and you'll see more varied characters." He stops short of actually unveiling the full list of who exactly we'll be playing, unfortunately. The Imperial guardsman is the only one that's been confirmed, though more have been shown off in concept art and trailers, including a huge ogryn.

Fatshark's desire for variety has manifested itself in several ways, and the most fundamental, perhaps, is melee and ranged combat now sharing the spotlight. *Vermintide* is a first-person melee series with several ranged options, but in *Darktide* it's an even split. Guns are extremely common in 40K, but the tabletop fights still frequently devolve into close-quarters brawls; and this makes even more sense within the confines of a hive city. What you use depends on the mission you're on, as well as the specific encounter, so character builds are becoming more situational.

MAIN: We haven't seen any yet, but apparently there will occasionally be NPCs in the streets.

"Expanding the gameplay loop to include a ranged component and seeing how we can push that to provide a better variety of gameplay experiences also connects with the loadout choices that you make both personally and as a team," says game designer Mats Andersson. "You get to play very targeted group setups, or make one with a very wide variety of different playstyles. If you look at *Vermintide II*, you are more pigeonholed than we want to make this type of game. We want to provide more options for you to approach the same kind of content."

HIVE MINDS

Before they delve back into the infested hive for another mission, the squad can prepare for the challenge with more granular customisation – it's not just about picking the right tools and accessories for the job. Fatshark is also considering things like talents for weapons, not just characters, and generally more ways to let you refine your character and get that alluring progression buzz.

"As we've seen in *Vermintide*, players really enjoy tweaking their loadouts," says creative director Anders De Geer. "And since we have a lot of great modders, they also want to tweak individual weapons, talents and other stuff. So we are working with a system right now that will allow players to have way more freedom than they had in *Vermintide* to customise their toolkit when they go into a mission."

This is something Fatshark's already been trying to do more in *Vermintide II* – letting players have more control over their rat-slaying adventures, via everything from rebalancing weapon choices to introducing entirely new subclasses as DLC. In *Darktide*, though, it sounds like an even more targeted approach is going to be cropping up everywhere from the off.

You can't make choices about loadouts and talents without proper intel, and that's where the mission map comes into play. This is the evolution of *Vermintide II*'s rather plain mission board and offers up a selection of crises affecting the various sectors of the gargantuan city. The idea is that you'll be able to see, at a glance, just how intense the mission will be and what modifiers are affecting it, like acid rain or blackouts. The city is constantly changing, too, with missions vanishing and maps you've already explored getting a refresh thanks to some fresh quirks.

"In *Vermintide II*, a lot of the dynamism came from the conflict director and how we spawned the

Gothic architecture never really goes out of style.

THE PACE AND THE TENSION WILL HAVE MORE PEAKS AND VALLEYS

enemies," says Wahlund. "Now we want to have the same type of feeling, but also working with the actual level itself, so it could be a bit different depending on how you play it and the missions that you play, but also because of the weather, electricity or gas leaks. There's a lot of things we can play around with to get a completely different feeling when you play a mission."

PACE MARINES

Violence, gore and waves of enemies are probably the first thing your mind conjures up when you think about *Vermintide*, but in *Darktide* the pace and the tension will have more peaks and valleys, with quieter moments to sneak around or solve a puzzle. It's more of what you might expect in a dungeon-delving RPG.

"It's really easy when making a game like *Vermintide* to just open the funnel, and then open it some more, because the more enemies we throw at people, the more fun it is," says Andersson. "But you can also go the opposite direction of actually bringing down the tempo and making it a bit more lenient. We want to be able to still provide that gameplay experience where your heart is up here all the time, but we also want to expand it into a place where you actually have time to talk and breathe. If we lower the tempo, we get a completely different kind of mood, if you will, in a level."

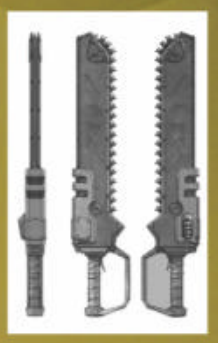
This is one of the reasons why you won't be playing as Space Marines. They're unstoppable juggernauts who, in a real-time setting, could easily just march through the hordes of enemies, never needing to rest, and certainly never taking a break for a chat. They're stoic and a little boring, and Fatshark wants characters with charisma. And fear, too, which Space Marines are also largely unfamiliar with.

Slowing things down doesn't always mean making things comfortable. If there's a power outage, for instance, you'll have to rely on flashlights to see where you're going, making your exploration of the sector more methodical, but no less tense. An abandoned dark sector is obviously fertile ground for some horror. While the Skaven are extremely unsettling, *Darktide* seems more

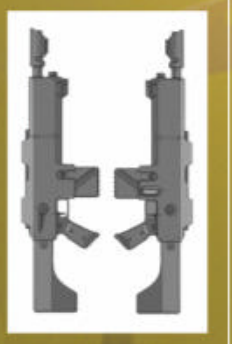
TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Choose your weapon

BOLTGUN
The standard Space Marine weapon, the boltgun is a devastating bit of a kit – a mobile cannon that can blow enemies to smithereens. Smaller versions are carried by the Astra Militarum.

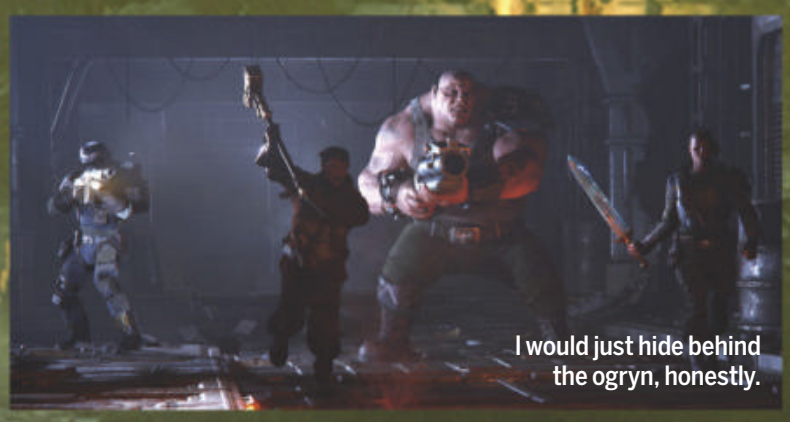


CHAINSWORD
The classic melee weapon of the Imperium across the galaxy. Its sharp, grinding teeth make quick work of thick armour and alien flesh. It's usually accompanied by a gun, so you can shoot and shred.



LASGUN
The main weapon of the Imperial army, the lasgun shoots out a focused energy beam that can sear off limbs and even puncture power armour. It's not the beast the bolter is, but it's still a good, solid weapon.

POWER HAMMER
This bad boy is as good at cracking armour as it is rocks thanks to the disruption field that surrounds it. Just think of how many poxwalkers you could take out with one devastating swing.



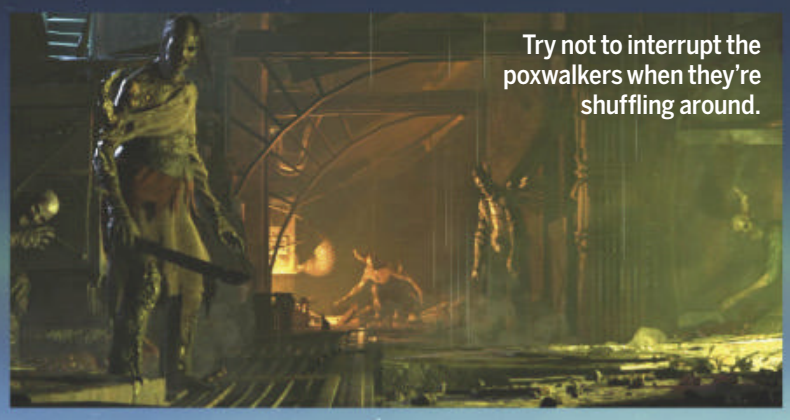
I would just hide behind the ogryn, honestly.

primed to get you jumping out of your seat, at least when you're sneaking through pitch-black areas that are filled with poxwalkers, the gruesome zombies cursed by the Chaos god of disease, Nurgle.

Poxwalkers are *Darktide*'s horde enemy. They gather in large groups and, though weak individually, can overwhelm squads with their huge numbers and relentless attacks. What makes them different from the Skaven, though, is that they're not constantly dialled up to 11. When you see the Skaven, they're charging at you, screeching at the top of their lungs, but zombies are typically a bit more chill, giving squads the opportunity to sneak around them. But that can also make them even more dangerous than the Skaven.

Just before we spoke, producer Steven Brigas found himself climbing up a ladder in the hive, believing himself to be alone, only to find a horde of poxwalkers just hanging out, waiting for him right at the top. If they'd been Skaven, they would have been jumping down that ladder straight away, spoiling their ambush. The poxwalkers got the better of Brigas, but next time they might not appear there, or he might be able to mow them down with a very large gun. Having all this

Warhammer 40,000: Darktide



Try not to interrupt the poxwalkers when they're shuffling around.

"CO-OP IS SOMETHING THAT WE'VE FOCUSED ON EVEN MORE THIS TIME AROUND"

devastating weaponry means you can annihilate more enemies, and Fatshark can throw even more at you – but not all of the time.

IN THE DARK

Making sure players aren't entirely sure what's lurking around the corner has been key to keeping people around in *Vermintide*, and Brigas says that Fatshark's taken a look at all of its systems to see how it can throw more surprises at players, rework maps and refine *Darktide*'s ability to keep dragging everyone back to the hive. The city itself gives the team even more freedom to experiment. These arcologies are designed to house billions of people, and while a hive world might contain thousands of them, each is still a self-contained city that functions like a world within a world.

"The scale is huge," says Brigas. "For me, what's really fun about a hive is, even if the odds are one in trillions, it's already happened. And that's just such a fun concept to play with. It gives us a lot of room to just keep growing and doing interesting stuff for a long time."

One mission could see your squad navigating the hive's disgusting sewage system in the dark, while your next misadventure could take you to a well-lit habitation zone that might even contain NPCs who have yet to be killed or transformed by Nurgle's minions. You probably won't be making your way through throngs of people, but there will be reminders that you're fighting in a place that was once teeming with life.

Revisiting an area that once housed some NPCs and seeing it taken over by enemies or emptied by a deadly gas leak is also bound to have more of an impact, reinforcing the stakes and making it clear that

MEET THE NEIGHBOURS

Who you'll be sharing the hive with

POXWALKERS

Poxwalkers are the cannon fodder of Nurgle's cursed armies – shambling, plague-ridden husks that serve as the living weapons of the traitor guard. They attack with teeth and claws and whatever simple weapons they can find, and they keep mutating even following death.

Like regular zombies, poxwalkers gather in hordes and can quickly swarm you.

TRAITOR GUARD

The traitor guard are former members of the Astra Militarum who have pledged themselves to Chaos. This regiment is the Moebian Sixth, deployed to help out the Moebian government, but are now attempting to seize power.

These treacherous guardsmen fight with anything from simple melee weapons and chain axes to lasguns and combat shotguns.

Fatshark hasn't confirmed all the classes yet, but here's our first look at the playable characters.

this is a warzone. Dynamic missions seem to suit live service games in particular, where developers can react to player feedback, tweak the modifiers, or introduce brand new ones in an update. The mission map can be "altered instantly, basically," says De Geer, with Fatshark able to wrench out a feature, like some bad weather, make some changes and then pop it back in once it's happy with the improvements. It also lets the team design special missions that appear only for a set time. Wahlund says these could come with additional unique rewards,

MAIN: Hives aren't just very big, they're also very tall. Don't take the stairs.

encouraging dedicated players to watch out for them and jump in as soon as one appears.

If you're looking for a group to take on these missions, Fatshark's trying to ensure that you still get to choose where you go. Where *Vermintide 2* strongly encourages players to use Quick Play, which throws you into a random mission, *Darktide* will grant more freedom to choose specific missions to play.

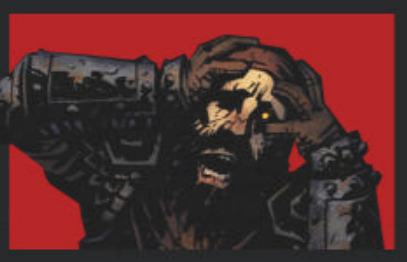
"Co-op is something that we've focused on even more this time around," says De Geer, and that goes beyond letting you have more of a say on where your co-op adventures take you. "We're trying to find more places to introduce co-op, and one of the strongest ones are special enemies, but there's also customising your loadout with your team and making sure you've covered all your bases."

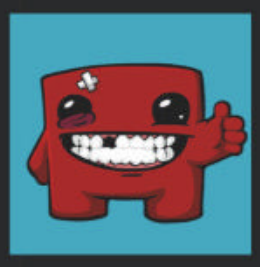
STICK TOGETHER

Vermintide's specialists, even the ones who couldn't take much of a beating, forced players to work together. If there's an assassin around, you need your teammates to keep their eyes open, or to kill it if it jumps you. In *Darktide*, Fatshark wants to use them to challenge players more and make them experiment with proper team tactics. It's still not settled on what these specialists will be, however. There's a lot of units that could fit the bill, though the team is mostly restricted to the roster of the tabletop game. Whatever the final list ends up being, the goal is to create encounters where it's imperative that players learn to cooperate effectively. "And if they don't," Brigas warns, "then they're not going to survive."

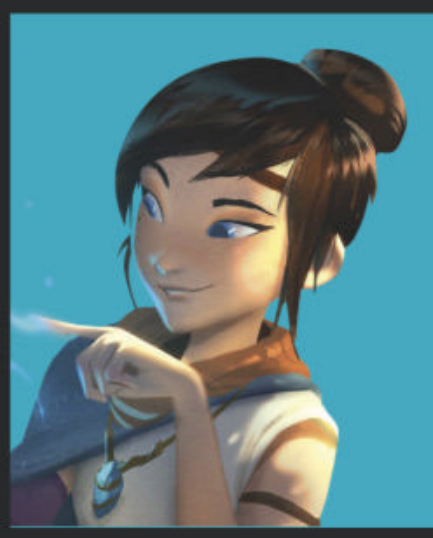
There are other things that might be used to bring players together – non-combat activities, for instance, and puzzles that are a bit more involved than pushing some stones in the correct order. There might be times when the party has to split up, too, but with the cooperative elements still intact. Maybe two players could fight off waves of enemies, while the other half of the quartet deal with a less bloody problem. This could also provide more opportunities for players to shine even if they're not racking up the kills. But Andersson emphasises that it's really about letting the whole team shine; letting everyone feel powerful together. "It's way more fun moving down a horde together than you doing it on your own with everyone else watching," he says. So the idea is to give everyone a chance to contribute, whether it's solving a puzzle, helping your squad by tanking a tough enemy. or utilising everyone's skills to kill a specialist.

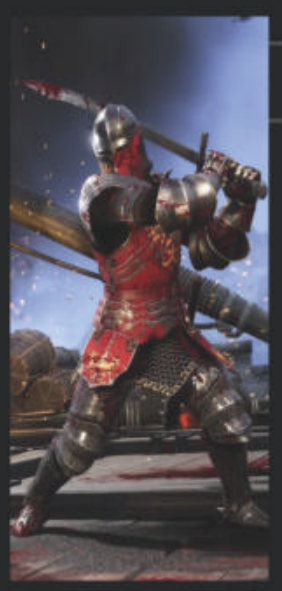
Darktide is still in this exciting stage where it's ripe with possibilities, but at this point it's hard to predict what it will look like when finished. Fatshark's idea of *Darktide* is still a compelling one, though, drawing out the best bits of *Vermintide* and investigating why they worked so well, and how that can be applied in other places or taken in new directions. And honestly, you can't go far wrong with chainswords. ■





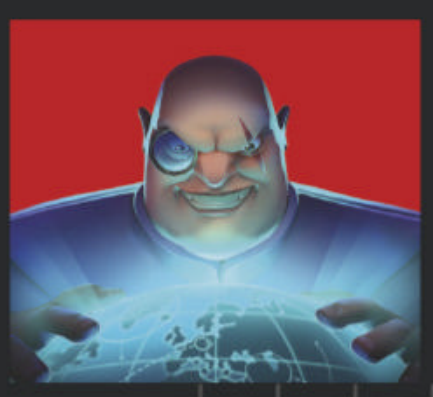
2021 PREVIEW





Looking forward to a whole new year of excellent PC gaming.

By Jeremy Peel & Rick Lane



DEATHLOOP

RELEASE May 2021 | **DEV** Arkane Studios | **PUB** Bethesda | **LINK** bethesda.net/game/deathloop

***Deathloop* puts you in the role of Colt, an assassin trapped on a giant party island where the main attraction is killing him. Colt, meanwhile, has eight targets who must all be dead by midnight.**

So far, it's a typical premise from *Dishonored* developer Arkane Studios. But there are a couple of twists. When you die, the whole game resets roguelike style. What's more, another player can invade your game as counter-assassin Julianna Blake, and her job is to prevent you doing yours.

Deathloop is an amalgam of everything Arkane has learned in its 20-year history. It's got the creative play of *Dishonored*, and the open-ended level design of *Prey*. But the biggest influence here is *Prey*'s expansion, *Mooncrash*. Arkane's Games are all about giving players the tools to play as they want. But it's easy to get tunnel vision when playing them, using only the most efficient tools and ignoring everything else. *Mooncrash* was designed to counter this, to make experimentation as much a part of the game as player choice. *Deathloop* aims to be a evolution of that idea.

ANOTHER PLAYER CAN INVADE YOUR GAME AS COUNTER ASSASSIN, JULIANNA BLAKE, AND HER JOB IS TO PREVENT YOU DOING YOURS

PRAEY FOR THE GODS

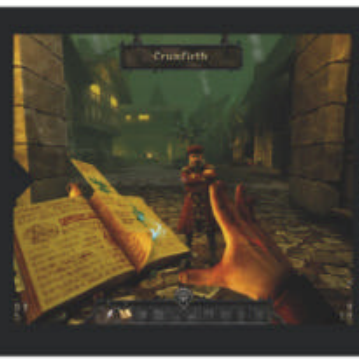
A spiritual successor to *Shadow of the Colossus*, *Praey for the Gods* takes the giant-monster battling from that, and adds a wintry landscape where the elements are as much a threat as the game's enormous foes.

RELEASE 2021

GRAVEN

An old-school action RPG set in a dark fantasy realm. With quests that emphasise puzzling out solutions alongside combat and spellcrafting systems, *GRAVEN* puts player choice front and centre.

RELEASE 2021



SABLE

You can see *Journey* in its vast deserts, *Breath of the Wild* in its shrines, and even The Force Awakens in its hoverbikes. But nothing else looks quite like *Sable*, thanks to an exquisitely scribbled art style.

RELEASE 2021

DEATH TRASH

The edgy '90s meets the nihilistic now in *Death Trash*, a sweary RPG with its own puking mechanic. For all the wasteland exploration, it's nice to see contemporary touches in there too, like dodge-heavy combat.

RELEASE 2021

TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX QUARANTINE

RELEASE 2021 | **DEV** Ubisoft Montreal | **PUB** In-house
LINK rainbow6.ubisoft.com/quarantine

As *Rainbow Six* continues to conquer the esports world, the series takes a roundabout route back to its PvE origins. Beginning life as a pacifist game about exploring cramped space stations in zero-g, *Quarantine* now looks more like a conventional co-op shooter – albeit one that finds Team Rainbow bringing coordinated death to aliens, rather than terrorists.

Quarantine appears to have its roots in *Outbreak*, a time-limited mode for Siege that pulled liberally from *Left 4 Dead*. Should be fun.

FAR CRY 6

RELEASE May 2021 | **DEV** Ubisoft Toronto | **PUB** Ubisoft
LINK ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/far-cry/far-cry-6

Ubisoft has unveiled plenty of information about *Far Cry 6*'s story. It's set on the fictional Caribbean island of Yara, and sees you play as freedom fighter Dani Rojas against the regime of dictator Antón Castillo. By comparison, details on play are sketchy. The most significant new feature appears to be the environment, which strays from the series' historically rural landscapes to a dense urban setting. Verticality is supposedly a big feature, making *Far Cry 6* sound like *Dying Light* without the zombies. Hopefully there's more to be revealed.

HALO INFINITE

RELEASE 2021 | **DEV** 343 Industries | **PUB** Microsoft | **LINK** bit.ly/37u0mry

Recapturing the initial magic of *Halo* has proven nigh on impossible for 343 Industries, and perhaps it's an unfair ask. *Combat Evolved*'s power came from its mystery, after all, and there's no putting the Flood back in the bottle – we simply know too much about the *Halo* universe nowadays.

Nonetheless, *Halo Infinite* finds the studio shooting for nostalgia like never before, its public demo going big on warthog jumps and grand skyboxes. Who knows what the game will look like by launch, though – after a muted fan response, Microsoft brought in Bungie old hand Joseph Staten to rework Infinite's campaign.

CHIVALRY 2

RELEASE 2021 | **DEV** Torn Banner | **PUB** Tripwire Interactive | **LINK** chivalry2.com

I'm not sure whether it's intentional, but *Chivalry: Medieval Warfare* is one of the funniest games I've ever played. There's something about its chaotic, absurdly violent melee combat (complete with the shoutiest, squishiest knights in Christendom) that has me in fits of giggles whenever I play it.

The sequel offers all of the things you'd expect. Shinier visuals, more nuanced melee combat, 64-player battles with working siege engines. But the question I want answered is 'will it make me laugh as hard as the time my cat fell into the toilet?'. Judging by the above screenshot, the answer is yes, it will.

STARFIELD

Little info is available about this, but the most significant factual nugget is Bethesda's claim *Starfield* will feature "a lot of new systems". Good, because fresh ideas are sorely needed from this RPG powerhouse.

RELEASE 2021

OUTRIDERS

Described as a "desperate sci-fi universe," *Outriders* looks like one, but not in a good way – its masks, long pistols and co-op RPG mechanics scream *Destiny*. Let's hope the individualism of People Can Fly shines through.

RELEASE Feb 2021

LITTLE NIGHTMARES 2

Imagine if Playdead's *Inside* was about classic scares rather than... whatever *Inside* was about. The familiar puzzle-platforming might not shock you, but the creepy residents of the Signal Tower intend to.

RELEASE Feb 2021

GLOOMWOOD

Being a *Thief* fan is the gaming equivalent of being lost in a desert, but *Gloomwood*'s retro-styled sneaking looks to be a rare stealth oasis. Expect late '90s 3D visuals, dazzling level design and, oddly, guns.

RELEASE 2021

BALDUR'S GATE III

RELEASE TBC | **DEV** Larian Studios | **PUB** In-house | **LINK** baldursgate3.game

Larian plunged *Baldur's Gate III* into the cold waters of Early Access back in October. It'll stay there for "at least one year," so a Christmas 2021 release for the full game is feasible – though who can trust the evidence of their eyes when mind flayers are about?

If the current build of the game is anything to go by, *Baldur's Gate III* will have not just a branching story, but layers of above-ground and subterranean world to explore. I don't know how many dimensions that is, but if Larian wants to stick 'the first 4D role-playing game' on the side of a bus, I'll put my name to it.

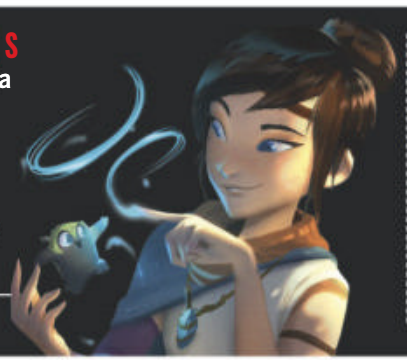
What we don't have a sense of yet is how the titular city will feature. Personally, I'm up for shoving enemies from rooftops in the spirit of original series villain Sarevok.

IF LARIAN WANTS TO STICK 'THE FIRST 4D ROLE PLAYING GAME' ON THE SIDE OF A BUS, I'LL PUT MY NAME TO IT

KENA: BRIDGE OF SPIRITS

'Ghibli-esque' is thrown around a lot, so let's get specific. *Kena* evokes the vibe of Princess Mononoke, both in its forest spirits and the sense of danger beyond the treeline. Swing your staff and transform the land.

RELEASE Q1 2021



JETT: THE FAR SHORE

The maker of *Sword and Sorcery* wants us to fly a rocket low over the choppy waves of an uncharted planet? Go on, then. They've brought in Randy Smith to create a world where systems bounce off each other.

RELEASE 2021

SHADOW WARRIOR 3

Flying Wild Hog has turned to id Software for inspiration with *Shadow Warrior 3*. The third game combines the series' wild weaponry and scatological humour with glory kills and arena-based fights.

RELEASE 2021

HUMANKIND

RELEASE April 2021 | **DEV** Amplitude Studios | **PUB** Sega | **LINK** humankind.game

If you come for the king, you better not miss – especially when the arena is turn-based. They'll have plenty of time to clobber you in the next round.

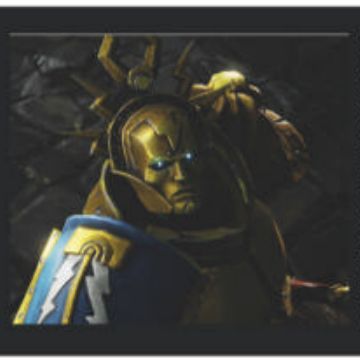
The king *Humankind* is coming for is *Civ*, and its weapon is a simple observation. Countries aren't single, solid blocks that upgrade over time – they're amalgams of cultures that together form a civilisation. You'll see that represented in the mechanics, which ask you to pick a people to begin with, then merge them with another every time you enter a new age. Victory isn't a matter of conquering, necessarily, but of being remembered – performing the most striking acts throughout history, so that even if your territory shrinks, the species will still speak your name. It's a novel take that we're hoping pays off.

VICTORY ISN'T A MATTER OF CONQUERING, NECESSARILY, BUT OF BEING REMEMBERED

WARHAMMER: AGE OF SIGMAR: STORM GROUND

One of the first videogame adaptations of Warhammer's Age of Sigmar universe, this turn-based strategy game promises to offer "dynamic and spectacular combat".

RELEASE 2021



DISTANT KINGDOMS

This management sim tasks players not only with establishing a sprawling city, but the infrastructure of an entire fantasy realm. You'll also need to dispatch adventuring parties to deal with dragons.

RELEASE 2021

PRODEUS

A retro-FPS that combines 2.5D geometry and sprites with modern lighting and pixel shaders, *Prodeus* looks like no other shooter you've played. It's fast, it's furious, and it has buckets of gore. Squelch.

RELEASE 2021

NEBUCHADNEZZAR

A 'classic' isometric city-builder. Barring expected features like population management, it includes a 'Monument Editor', letting you personalise your megalithic wonder to your exact specifications.

RELEASE Feb 17, 2021

EVIL GENIUS 2

RELEASE 2021 | **DEV** Rebellion | **PUB** In-house
LINK evilgeniusgame.com

Like the greatest criminal masterminds, *Evil Genius* has arisen from seemingly certain defeat. The sequel to the 2004 management sim sees you striving once more to take over the world, like a James Bond villain.

Alongside familiar mechanics like building your island base and stopping enemy agents with elaborate traps, *Evil Genius 2* adds more detail to minion management and mission types, while introducing new features like the 'front', a legitimate casino you also need to manage as cover for your evil schemes.

KING'S BOUNTY II

RELEASE 2021 | **DEV** 1C Entertainment
PUB In-house | **LINK** kingsbounty2.com

A sequel 30 years in the making, *King's Bounty II* is a fantasy RPG that blends third-person exploration with hex-based tactical combat. The game involves building a motley army of humans, elves, trolls etc, as your hero seeks to end a terrible blight afflicting the Kingdom of Antara. While the tactical combat is the main draw, the sequel also has ambitious plans for its story, offering a non-linear narrative in which player choices will affect both the character you interact with and the broader world. The fantasy world of *King's Bounty* isn't exactly radical, so a good story with memorable characters will be crucial to make it stand out.

BLOOD BOWL III

RELEASE Early 2021 | **DEV** Cyanide Studio | **PUB** Nacon | **LINK** bit.ly/33AI2vH

When Cyanide first resurrected *Blood Bowl*, it was from a dusty box on the top shelf – the Warhammer tabletop game hadn't had a new edition for two of its three decades of existence. Nevertheless, the studio stuck meticulously to murder football's beloved ancient ruleset and helped revitalise the physical game as a result. Now Games Workshop has released a rebooted tabletop version, and its new teams will be folded back into *Blood Bowl III*. Cyanide's last sequel finally captured the crunch of *Blood Bowl* in the imagination; a little extra fidelity won't hurt the next entry in that regard.

NEW WORLD

RELEASE 2021 | **DEV** Amazon Games | **PUB** In-house | **LINK** newworld.com

Amazon's plans to break into gaming haven't gone swimmingly, what with the dismal failure of *Crucible* last year. *New World* looks more promising. It's a fantasy MMO that includes all the features you'd expect: fighting monsters, looting and crafting gear, and unlocking new skills.

So far, so generic. What makes *New World* different is its social element. Players can band together to form companies, which can stake claims on land, upgrade settlements and even conquer other territories. It does mean, however, that *New World*'s success will hinge upon attracting a decent player-base.

SPACEBASE STARTOPIA

17 years after it was abandoned, the Spacebase Startopia is back online. This faithful sequel sees you once again balancing the needs and desires of various alien species in order to turn intergalactic profits.

RELEASE Spring 2021

GLOOMHAVEN

This virtual adaptation of the board game ventures from Early Access later this year. Colourfully reimagined, it sees you gathering a party and embarking on sharp and ferociously challenging quests.

RELEASE 2021

INDUSTRIES OF TITAN

This dystopian city-builder involves establishing an industrial metropolis within the atmosphere of Saturn's largest moon. Depressingly, it lets you transform unreliable human workers into obedient robots.

RELEASE 2021

DARKEST DUNGEON II

RELEASE 2021 | **DEV** Red Hook | **PUB** In-house
LINK darkestdungeon.com

There isn't much information about *Darkest Dungeon II*, but one of the more significant announcements by developer Red Hook is that it's going full 3D. The shift to 3D represents a general filling-out of the ideas explored in the original rogue-like. The sequel will venture beyond the mansion and subterranean warrens of the first game, while also elaborating upon the nature of the horrors you battle. Importantly, the shift to 3D won't impact the game's highly distinctive art-style – the initial trailer, though light on footage, shows off how great it all still looks.

THE DARK PICTURES ANTHOLOGY: HOUSE OF ASHES

RELEASE 2021 | **DEV** Supermassive Games
PUB Bandai Namco | **LINK** bit.ly/3msWqxx

The Dark Pictures Anthology is a Creepshow-style collection of narrative-driven horror stories. While the tales themselves are not that original, what makes them interesting is the multiplayer, which lets two players share a story where their individual decisions influence the final outcome.

House of Ashes is the third entry in the series. Taking place at the end of the Iraq War, a team of American soldiers stumble upon a Sumerian temple home to creatures far more dangerous than the enemies they're supposed to fight.

GHOSTWIRE TOKYO

RELEASE 2021 | **DEV** Tango Gameworks | **PUB** In-house | **LINK** beth.games/3qlP3dy

The new game from the studio of *Resident Evil* creator Shinji Mikami puts you in Japan's capital after a supernatural event disappears most of the population. Meanwhile, an army of spirits invades the city, ranging from demonic monsters to a creepy little girl wearing a yellow raincoat.

Despite the spooky ongoings, *Ghostwire* isn't strictly survival horror. Instead, it's more action-oriented, with intense magical melee combat that revolves around hand-gestures known as Kuji-Kiri. Tango has hired Shinchiro Haro, who helped build the combat of *Doom* (2016) to work on *Ghostwire*.

BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE 2021 | **DEV** Hardsuit Labs | **PUB** Paradox Interactive | **LINK** bit.ly/3qnb7Er

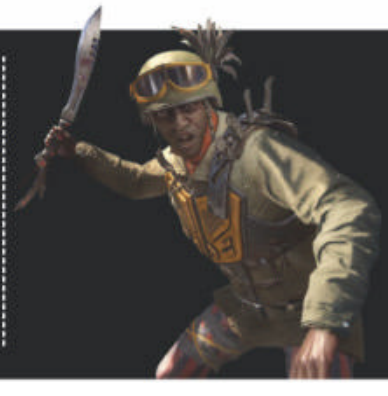
A sequel nobody expected, this is the follow-up to the critically acclaimed (and critically broken) *Vampire: The Masquerade Bloodlines*. You play as a neophyte vampire prowling the moonlit streets of Seattle, doing jobs for the city's vampiric factions while hiding from general society according to the code of conduct called The Masquerade.

Delayed from last year, change is afoot at developer Hardsuit Labs, having fired both creative director Ka'i Cluney and lead writer Brian Mitsoda. Trouble on the project, or the cogs of the game industry turning? Let's hope it isn't a repeat performance of 2004.

RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE

Where *Resident Evil 7* was a first-person reimagining of the 1996 original, *Village* looks set to do the same with *Resident Evil 4*. It takes place in a European-looking hamlet with enemies that look like ganados.

RELEASE 2021



DYING LIGHT 2

Combines the free-running zombie-bashing of the original with a narrative structure that sees your decisions affect the city you're in. The latest reports suggest development is progressing smoothly.

RELEASE 2021

SYSTEM SHOCK

The eternally in-development remake released a demo earlier this year. It was fantastic, with updated environments and tweaks that made it easier to comprehend without sacrificing the atmosphere.

RELEASE 2021

THE OUTLAST TRIALS

"It's always better to shit your pants in good company," claims the developer. I'd argue this is the worst place to shit your pants, but I'm intrigued by the shift toward multiplayer for this *Outlast* spin-off.

RELEASE 2021

WARHAMMER 40,000 DARKTIDE

RELEASE 2021 | **DEV** Fatshark | **PUB** In-house | **LINK** playdarktide.com

Fatshark is adapting its rat-tastic multiplayer action into the 40k universe. Expect more of the meaty first-person melee combat of *Vermintide*, but with sci-fi guns in the mix, there's more ranged action as well.

While Fatshark have been cagey about some of the finer details of what we can expect, early footage suggests we'll be able to play as various servants of the Inquisition, including loyal guardsmen, a fanatical priest, and even a hulking Ogryn – an ogre-like warrior far larger than any character from *Vermintide*.

Instead of Skaven and northmen, the enemy is a Chaos cult infesting a towering hive city. These heretics worship the plague god Nurgle – meaning we'll be up against shambling mutant zombies and disgusting demonic monstrosities.

THESE HERETICS WORSHIP NURGLE – WE'LL BE UP AGAINST SHAMBLING MUTANT ZOMBIES AND DISGUSTING DEMONIC MONSTROSITIES

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2

If *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2* actually launches this year I will eat my gasmask, but it's slated for 2021 so I'm including it. Details are slim, but GSC Game World promises "one of the biggest open worlds to date".

RELEASE 2021

CHERNOBYLITE

Chernobylite promises *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*-like exploration and weird horror, but with a stronger narrative. While promising, the Early Access version is rough, so hopefully the devs can tighten things up.

RELEASE 2021

ATOMIC HEART

You could describe *Atomic Heart* as 'Russian *BioShock*', but that wouldn't do justice to how downright bizarre it is. Set in 1955, you must investigate a Soviet facility filled with weird robots and terrifying mutants.

RELEASE 2021

GOTHAM KNIGHTS

RELEASE 2021 | **DEV** WB Games Montral | **PUB** Warner Bros | **LINK** gothamknightsgame.com

Making a Batman game without Batman is certainly a bold move, but when you replace one hero with four, suddenly it doesn't seem like such a rough deal. That's the premise of *Gotham Knights*, which sees Batgirl, Robin, Nightwing and Red Hood team-up to rid Gotham's streets of crime after Bruce Wayne is apparently killed in an explosion.

Despite not sharing the name, *Gotham Knights* remains firmly of the *Arkham* mould, featuring a big open world in which you'll glide and drive around, get into fisticuffs with thugs, and have dramatic encounters with villains such as Mr Freeze. As well as those four characters, *Gotham Knights* also features drop-in co-op, although for some reason this is limited to two players. Still, the ability to fight crime as a dynamic duo might catch on.

AS WELL AS LETTING YOU PLAY AS ONE OF FOUR CHARACTERS GOTHAM KNIGHTS ALSO FEATURES DROP-IN CO-OP

LANDLORD'S SUPER

From *Jalopy*'s developer comes an equally unglamorous simulator set in Thatcher's Britain. Your job is to renovate a house while assailing the moral and practical problems of being dirt poor. So much for escapism.

RELEASE 2021

WE ARE THE CARETAKERS

There are lots of games that sort of resemble *XCOM*, but only one that puts you in charge of protecting the rhinos in a sci-fi Africa. Assemble squads to protect and conserve. Sounds like a lot of fun so far.

RELEASE Q1 2021

GARDEN STORY

Cute enough to make you sick, *Garden Story* sees you play as a grape called Concord, tasked with protecting the grove that serves as his home. You'll solve puzzles, chat with fruity friends, and care for your garden.

RELEASE 2021

THE WILD AT HEART

Harvest Moon meets *Pikmin* in in this cute top-down adventure. Set in a magical kingdom populated by 'spritelings,' you can use these helpful critters to build structures, collect loot, and fight enemies.

RELEASE 2021

PSYCHONAUTS 2

RELEASE 2021 | **DEV** Double Fine | **PUB** Xbox Game Studios | **LINK** fig.co/campaigns/psychonauts-2

The idea of diving into the brains of the broken to see things from their perspective – an act of empathy – certainly feels like it belongs more in 2021 than 2005. The question is whether *Psychonauts 2* will stand out in an era of oddball indie games. But footage of its platforming headscapes bodes well – even after the departure of project lead Zak McClendon, leaving Tim Schafer with "twice as much work to do" as both writer and director. The extra time and funding of Xbox, which recently bought Double Fine, won't hurt in that department.

GRIFTLANDS

RELEASE Jun 2021 | **DEV** Klei Entertainment
PUB In-house | **LINK** klei.com/games/griftlands

Yet another deck-building roguelike wouldn't necessarily get the blood pumping, were it not for three important factors.

First, that its developer Klei, creator of *Mark of the Ninja*, *Invisible Inc.* and *Don't Starve*, has reshaped three genres and counting. Second, that *Griftlands* isn't just about combat but turn-based negotiations, in which you play cards to threaten or fast talk, bringing opponents in sci-fi bars around to your point of view. And third, the sheer number of 'Overwhelmingly Positive' user reviews plastered all over the game's Steam Early Access page. Klei has already persuaded its current playerbase; can it win you over too?

BIOMUTANT

RELEASE 2021 | **DEV** Experiment 101 | **PUB** THQ Nordic | **LINK** biomutant.com

I'm gonna say it. Furry *Zelda*. That's the easiest way to summarise *Biomutant*. This ambitious open-world RPG puts you in the role of an anthropomorphic animal fellow in a land that blends fantasy with junkyard sci-fi.

Biomutant's story sounds like typical 'save the world' guff, but what makes the game interesting is its character customisation. Alongside a nuanced crafting system and martial-arts-based combat, your character can mutate, changing both how it looks and available abilities. You could evolve claws or a barbed tail, both of which can be used in combat. It sounds pretty intriguing.

RUINED KING

RELEASE Early 2021 | **DEV** Airship Syndicate | **PUB** Riot Forge | **LINK** ruinedking.com

Ruined King sees several of *League of Legends*' most popular heroes step out of their MOBA lanes and into a single-player RPG.

Developed by Airship Syndicate, players assume control of Miss Fortune, Illaoi, Braum, Yasuo, Ahri or Pyke, as they explore the city of Bilgewater and the Shadow Isles on a quest to stop a mysterious force known as the Black Mist.

Early footage shows turn-based combat that looks very much in the vein of one of the developer's previous games, *Battle Chasers: Nightwar*, so expect creative strategy and charmingly chunky animation.

BOOK OF ALIENS

Fancy playing *XCOM* but don't have a spare 40 hours? *Book of Aliens* might be you. This compact tactics game aims to offer all the thrills and tension of Firaxis' sci-fi strategy, but in a much more digestible package.

RELEASE 2021

SUPER MEAT BOY FOREVER

The steak-based platformer has had an oddly protracted cooking time, starting as a mobile game and without the involvement of original designer and artist Edmund McMillen. It's got more than 7,000 levels!

RELEASE 2021

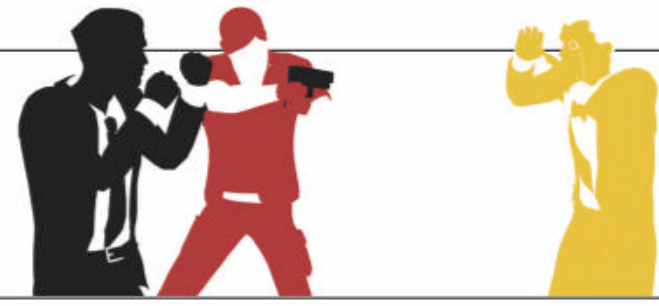
SHADOWS OF DOUBT

A detective game taking place in a city where every building is accessible. Solve dynamic crimes ranging from stolen baseball cards to serial murders through conversations, collecting evidence, and stealth.

RELEASE 2021

PREVIEW

Fights in Tight Spaces



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Early 2021	Ground Shatter	Mode7, Bithell Games	fightsintightspaces.com

FIGHTS IN TIGHT SPACES

Finally, a deckbuilding game to make Jason Statham proud

Agent 11 is the kind of person who smooths back his hair at the start of a brawl, straightens his tie before breaking a nose with the flat of his hand. You never actually see his face, but from the way he bobs around, the man seems very happy in his work as he crushes windpipes, stomps on faces and cracks skulls against countertops.

If that brings to mind a certain other numerically-monikered agent, well, he's certainly in the mix – especially Daniel Craig's take on Bond as a brutal besuited psychopath. But the star of *Fights in Tight Spaces* is also John Wick, Henry Cavill reloading his arms, and every single character Jason Statham has ever played

"When we first started, I got Connie [Duffy], who does our video editing, to put together a big folder of scenes clipped out of films," lead designer James Parker says. "The elevator fight scene from Captain America, the corridor fight from Old Boy, the bathroom fight from Mission: Impossible – all these scenes that capture people's imaginations."

This is not exactly an unusual mix of reference points for a videogame, admittedly. But *Fights in Tight Spaces* isn't an action game. It's a mix of roguelike, deckbuilder, and turn-based tactics. Parker is upfront about his influences here, too, "The games I'd been playing a lot around the time were *Slay the Spire* and *Into the Breach*." If you can hold those two games in your head, and splice them with The Stath's back catalogue, you're most of the way to imagining *Fights in Tight Spaces*.

Each fight plays out on a (tight, natch) grid. You're surrounded by the usual selection of thugs, goons and henchmen, who break the old cinematic rule to mob you all at once – but luckily, they're slow to act. That gives you a turn to get yourself out of danger, dispatching as many of them as you can along the way. And the stunts you're going to be using to achieve this? Well, that's what your deck is for.

A standard hand of cards might include a block, a dodging manoeuvre or two, and a nice little selection pack of kicks and punches. So you knife past this enforcer, then shoulder-barge him into the path of a gunman, before turning to deliver a roundhouse to another lad with a blowtorch. End turn, and their choreographed moves all play out, and your first victim takes a bullet to the head from his former pal. And a great big smile breaks out across your face.

PLAYED IT

DIE HARD

Fights in Tight Spaces isn't just a game inspired by action heroes. It tries to force you to play like one – taking out foes with style. "Dodging is cool when it means you force someone with a gun to shoot his mate in the head. Getting out of the way when you've only got a bit of health left, and you want a breather, that's thematically appropriate," Parker says. "But we don't want the best tactic to be just getting out of the way, because that's not particularly empowering. It doesn't make you feel like a cool action hero, it makes you feel a bit like a wimp."

Enter the game's combo system, designed to encourage more aggressive play. Every successful attack causes the combo meter to tick up, boosting the damage on some attacks and unlocking powerful finishing moves that can only be played when the combo hits a certain number. For every square you move, though, it chips away at your current combo. So ideally, you don't want to be dodging in and out of enemies' attacks – you want to move them around you, like the river flows around the stone.

This balance is one that Parker and his team at Ground Shatter are still trying to find themselves. For my money, staying in one place is currently too risky. The

IT'S A MIX OF ROGUELIKE, DECKBUILDER AND TURN-BASED TACTICS

Fights in Tight Spaces

rhythm of these fight scenes requires the hero to be taking hits, and Agent 11 is made of glass. Blocking can be effective, but it never feels quite right, especially when the guns come out – and besides, one small miscalculation and you're a step closer to permadeath. Healing is a rare treat, even by comparison to *Slay the Spire*, and I often found myself preferring the wimpier option.

"At the moment, we are pretty unfair on the player," Parker admits. To date, the game has relied on a group of testers, and their tastes run a little masochistic. "Even I struggle to play it quite a lot of the time," he says. "If someone like me can't play it, then we probably need to tailor it for a wider range of players."

This is beginning to change, though. The game was (technically) a launch title for Xbox Series X & S, via Microsoft's Game Preview programme, helping to gradually expand the player base ahead of a PC Early Access launch (due this year). In case you're wondering which flavour of Early Access we're talking about here (other varieties including: 'basically complete', 'barely left the programmer's keyboard', and 'hugely overambitious mess'), *Fights in Tight Spaces* is one of those where the core loop is already solid, but the shape of the game around it is still wobbly. Kind of like those Ben & Jerry's tubs with the lump of frozen cookie dough in the middle.

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE?

To use a non-ice-cream-based example: there's currently no persistent progression in the game. When a run ends, you're kicked back to the start menu, with no dopamine-loosening level-up bar ticking up or fresh unlockables to take into the next. This isn't down to Parker being some kind of roguelike puritan – he just doesn't know which bits to lock off yet. "Knowing what's going to be both worthwhile enough to give players as a reward, but also not so important that they'll miss it if they don't have it, it's quite a fine line to draw," he says. "That's going to be a thing that comes further down the line."

This is a smart approach, although does mean *Fights in Tight Spaces* will probably be the rare game that slims down in Early Access – at least, the first-run version of it. But Parker, aware of the deep card pools offered by the competition, wants to keep it growing too. "We can't come out the gate saying 'well, we're a small new game so we've only got ten cards', that's never going to wash," he says – and Parker is constantly thinking of new mechanics and new ways to bend the existing ones. "Every time I take a break from putting in new cards, when I come back to it, I'll realise: oh, there's a whole kind of suite of things that I haven't considered yet that we can do."

There are a couple of complications, though, that make implementing these ideas trickier than *Slay the Spire*'s 'here's some scribbled MS Paint card art while we test it out' approach. "Unlike the majority of deckbuilding card games, we have that full 3D physicality where everything is animated. So there's a lot of content to create, and it has to look amazing." Which is where those action-movie sizzle reels come back into play, along with YouTube videos of martial artists doing the same move over and over – perfect reference material for an animator.

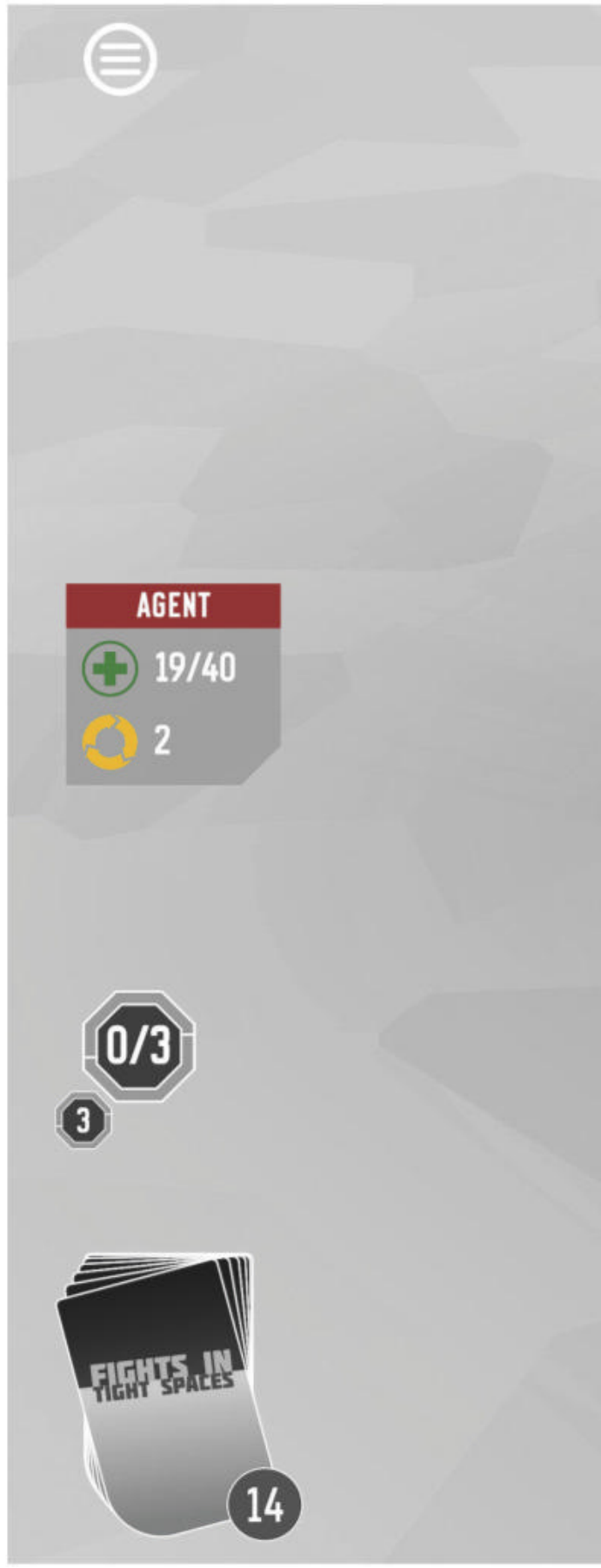
The second complication stems right from that action-movie theming. "If we had wizards in the game, it would make life so much easier for me," he says. "Then you can have a spell where a plant comes out of the ground on the other side of the game board and sucks someone underground." Because of its theme, the game can't rely on this kind of abstraction. Every move has to be grounded in reality (the movie version, at least) and expressed through Agent 11's movements.

So, I ask Parker, why make it harder for yourself? "A lot of those card games don't personally appeal to me, thematically speaking. I'm not really a fantasy fan, those worlds don't interest me particularly." The action-movie thing isn't just an affectation for Parker, it's a genuine passion – his office is more 'Jason Statham mugs' than 'Lord of the Rings posters', as he puts it.

This brings a lot of challenges when you're making a card game, but also has potential to open (or rather, kick down) a new door, he reckons "to find other people like me for whom something like *Monster Train* or whatever is not quite visually, or thematically, the thing they're after". The kind of person who can appreciate a good cracked skull or crushed windpipe, and understands the value of being immaculately dressed while you do it.

Alex Spencer

"IF WE HAD WIZARDS IN THE GAME, IT WOULD MAKE LIFE SO MUCH EASIER FOR ME"



Fights in Tight Spaces

Meet the ambassador: you're sworn to protect his useless arse, but are free to kick it out the way of enemy attacks.

Ninjas. Of course there are ninjas.

How're you going to get out of this one, Sherlock?

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2021	Midwinter Entertainment	Improbable	playscavengers.com

SCAVENGERS

Battle royale meets survival game, to fight it out in the snow

The first real surprise playing *Scavengers* is the map. I think I've got the measure of it, and then the captain of my three-person team – Midwinter's head of production Mary Olson – mentions something I can't see. I scroll the mouse wheel to realise I've been looking at a small fraction of the nine square kilometres of snow known as Cascade Springs.

This is a good thing, as it turns out, because it puts more distance between us and the other players stalking the tundra. Looked at one way, *Scavengers* is a battle royale: there's a big map, a shrinking circle, and 60 players trying to scrape together gear and eliminate the competition. But you can, just about, make it to victory without killing a single other person. That's certainly Olson's preferred approach. At the first sound of an approaching engine, or the red minimap dots that indicate enemy fire, she encourages us to flee like a ledge-dangling Gandalf.

Not that the match passes without bloodshed, however – because players aren't the only threat you need to be worrying about when having a go at *Scavengers*. The map itself is hostile, with freezing temperatures, roaming blizzards and the occasional bear mauling.

And then there are the hundreds of AI-controlled baddies you're sharing it with, split into two factions: the Outlanders, who provide more than enough gun battles for my first outing, and the grotesquely mutated Scourge.

THE MAP ITSELF IS HOSTILE, WITH ROAMING BLIZZARDS AND THE OCCASIONAL BEAR

PLAYED IT

Both cluster around objective points, applied to the map randomly at the start of each match. Find one, fight back the local mobs and you'll be rewarded with scrap for crafting weapons and upgrades, or the data point canisters that decide each game's winner, or pieces of salvage that – as long as you survive – can be exchanged for longer-term unlocks. It's enough to keep you busy even if you dodge your fellow players, and Midwinter Entertainment is hoping this will help attract players averse to the bloodbath of a battle royale.

CYBERJUNK

Like, for example, Olson: "I'm probably in that player category that is the big question for everyone: can a player who prefers PvE play this game, have fun and be successful?" Midwinter is confident it can make a satisfying competitive shooter, but blending it with something more akin to a survival game? That's something the studio is still working on as the game heads into a closed beta.

It's already led to a major reinvention of *Scavengers*' endgame, where players rush to a dropship for evacuation. In early playtests, this was a single, tiny point on that enormous map. "And the second you entered it, you were safe," Olson explains. But that didn't quite work, which brought Midwinter to the current approach: a large arena, and a one-minute countdown. When it reaches zero, the dropship at the centre takes off, and every team with a representative aboard gets to keep their spoils.

This means each game can have multiple winners. Following Olson's lead, I hide under one of the ship's ramps until the last second, then break cover and I hop on board. Victory! Of a sort. But if you can't accept being halfway down the scoreboard as a win, then there's plenty of reason to turn this into a bloodbath. When players die, they drop their data points in the snow, which also happen to decide who sits at the top of the table.

It's like a psychological test for what kind of player you are deep down. In my case, a conflict-avoidant coward who's happy in their little corner of the map. But hey, that means I'm exactly the person *Scavengers* is trying to invite in.

Alex Spencer

Skidding around in this three-person hovercraft is great fun.

Blimey, that's a long barrel.

This big lad is Sluka, a roaming Scourge boss designed to draw players together.

Orbital debris drops randomly from the sky.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC	Might and Delight	In-house	mightanddelight.com

BOOK OF TRAVELS

Adventure in a world where you're not forced to be the hero

I love playing the role of the wanderer in games, but it's pretty difficult to explore virtual worlds without some bloodthirsty monster trying to kill me. Is it too much to ask to quietly traverse *The Witcher 3*'s Novigrad, collecting herbs and picking plants, without a ferocious wolf trying to gnaw my arm off?

FIRST LOOK

I'm down for fisticuffs more often than not, but there are moments when I just want to explore and take it all in. Thankfully, Might and Delight has come to my rescue with *Book of Travels*, an upcoming RPG that embraces this wanderer philosophy.

Self-described as a "collaborative and friendly roleplaying experience", there are no linear quests or nagging plotlines. Players are free to explore the handcrafted world of Braided Shore at their own pace. Might and Delight describes it as a TMO, a 'tiny multiplayer online' game, with a focus on exploration and companionship, two themes that the studio is more than familiar with.

"Making the *Shelter* games taught us how to evoke strong emotions and how to make simple things matter," Might and Delight's art director, Jakob Tuchten explains. "We felt we had stumbled upon many unique and interesting multiplayer mechanics that seemed to make people interact and roleplay in really friendly and creative ways, mechanics we wanted to develop further."

Book of Travels will be Might and Delight's first Early Access title, and after a successful Kickstarter with 7,000 backers, the team is more than eager to get the community involved in the development process.

"We see ourselves a bit like a dungeon master," Tuchten explains. "We want to emulate what the community wants, taking into account what secrets they like, the direction of the game, and which storylines they react to. We want to tailor the game's future to both match that and to also challenge perceptions people have in the game."

PAGE TURNER

Book of Travels is definitely challenging perceptions. Might and Delight has been more than happy to celebrate that *Book of Travels* is not your traditional MMORPG. Many of the story beats that guide the player through a fantasy world have been set aside. With no overarching goal, no real beginning or end, you are the one in charge of shaping your own journey.

"Our world is serene," Tuchten says. "It's not plagued by an evil monster or a bad king. It doesn't have that cliché dark fantasy storyline where everything is about to go to hell, and you're the focal point of trying to set it right."

But just because *Book of Travels*' world has a peaceful cadence, it doesn't mean Might and Delight has scrapped all means of conflict. Tuchten explains how entering a fight with monsters is a serious event with consequences. The team's still deciding the exact mechanics, but promise that encounters will often be traumatic and have an emotional aftermath – not something to take lightly.

"We have the opportunity to actually do combat that is meaningful," Tuchten explains. "When it happens, it involves risk and has a dramatic impact on your character. We debated for a long time whether combat should be a part of the world at all, but we want to convey the serenity or the calmness of the world, and that needed to be accentuated by having a danger just outside of the road."

Roads wind between important locations, but every wanderer knows what lies off the beaten path is worth discovering too, even if danger lies in the wilds. Luckily you'll have plenty of skills and abilities to help you explore, and just like combat, Might and Delight has

ENTERING A FIGHT WITH MONSTERS IS A SERIOUS EVENT WITH CONSEQUENCES

Book of Travels

Stick to the main roads and paths for safety.

Braided Shore has a painterly style to its gorgeous visuals

approached these RPG elements in its own unique way.

"There is a sort of levelling-up system, but it's not tailored to the same sort of framework as normal MMOs. It's based around skill slots," Tuchten says. "As you progress through the game, you'll get more empty slots for learned skills you get from the world. You may have ten skills but only three slots, and each one takes up a certain amount of space. For example, a powerful skill, like the ability to transfer into an animal, would take up five skill slots."

Skills are not something you learn automatically, but through teachings from the world's characters. If you want to learn how to fish, you'll need to seek out a fisherman. Same with tea brewing and knot tying – the two major magical practices in *Book of Travels*. Knots hold short-term magical abilities that when untied provide a short burst of magic (such as teleporting to the other side of a river), whereas teas have long-term magical properties, but must be carefully brewed while sitting next to a fire.

Abilities can be heightened with choices you make in the character creation process by choosing talents, backstories, and personality traits. You can be a carefree traveller who grew up in the mountains, a historian seeking to discover Braided Shore's lost past, or a mysterious cloaked outlaw with a knack for the magical arts. It's refreshing to see a character creator that puts the focus on things other than combat ability.

"The biggest thing for me personally is that we have developed a game design surrounding roleplaying freedom," Tuchten says. "Because of the game's open-ended design, you're not forced to be a hero, which to us makes the roleplay aspects so much greater."

QUIET COMPANIONS

One particular mechanic that makes Might and Delight's game collection unique is that they create meaningful ways of communicating without using any words or dialogue. Creating companionship through wordless interactions has always been a key theme in Might and Delight's games: the unspoken bond between an animal mother and her cubs in the *Shelter* games, the friendship between a bear and a lynx cub in *Paws*, and *Tiny Echo*'s silent spirit delivering mail to a community.

IT HAS MIGHT AND DELIGHT'S SIGNATURE VISUALS, BUT THIS TIME ON A GRAND SCALE

In *Book of Travels*, NPCs will speak to you in little dialogue bubbles but you and your party can only communicate through symbols and emotes. It's an idea the studio explored in their first MMO, *Meadow,* where it created some surprising meaningful player bonds.

You don't have to buddy up with others though, *Book of Travels* lets you be a lone wolf if you want. You can go off and have your own adventure, following story leads and uncovering mysteries on your own. There is a wealth of lore under *Book of Travels*'s fairy-tale surface for players to dive into – if they so choose. It's completely up to you.

One storyline kicks off in one of the game's cities, Casa. It acts as the starting point for adventure when you first begin the game and it didn't play out like I expected. "There's been a murder in the city," Tuchten says. "A mythical creature called a Sepra, which is what we call the genies of this world, has been murdered, and that's never happened before. There's a mystery surrounding how it died and how it's affected the politics of the city."

As serene as *Book of Travels* world may seem, Might and Delight wants the world's cities to be like the metropolises of the real world – neither good or bad but somewhere in the middle. Settlements are going to be bustling with activity and are supposed to make the player feel somewhat overwhelmed.

The world of Braided Shore looks stunning. It has Might and Delight's signature visuals, but this time on a grand scale. It may look 2D, but there's plenty of depth and, as you explore each area, layers of the scene fade in and out of the foreground, like a delicate paper theatre.

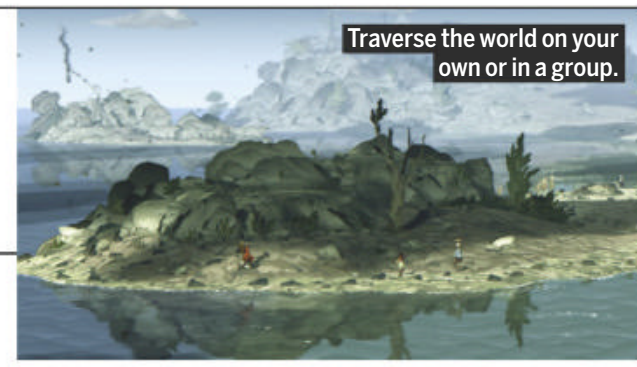
Book of Travels has taken traditional aspects of online RPGs and reimagined them in a very Might and Delight way. And, from the overwhelming success of the Kickstarter campaign, both fans and those not familiar with the studio's work have been spellbound by the strange, whimsical idea of a serene RPG.

It's not often a game gives you the opportunity to embody the archetype of a wanderer, but Might and Delight seems to be on track with *Book of Travels*. It's a whole world designed for those who want to let their curiosity guide them, and that's pretty special.

Rachel Watts

Book of Travels

Cities come alive with NPCs and traders during the night.



Traverse the world on your own or in a group.

Goodbye Volcano High

Volcano High, before saying goodbye.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2021	KO_OP	In-house	goodbyevolcanohigh.com

GOODBYE VOLCANO HIGH

It's time to play triceratops trumps

You'd be forgiven for thinking that, of the many things a game about dinosaurs that go to high school is likely to be, 'relatable' isn't one of them. Yet you would be wrong. Despite the dinos, this is set to be a game that tells a deep, surprisingly human story.

Goodbye Volcano High is a narrative adventure game. The player drops in when graduation is on the horizon and the protagonist, Fang, needs to make a decision about where they want their life to go. "What this game is really about," says Saleem Dabbous, studio director and *Goodbye Volcano High* co-director, "is asking yourselves, if you knew everything was going to come to an end, what would you do with that time? What are the choices that you would make? And who would you want to be?"

KO_OP isn't quite ready to go into great detail about how the game will play, but it's keen to stress that player choice will be important. Things go much deeper than 'path A or path B', as co-director and animation director Kyle McKernan explains: "There's [a] choice of pursuing newer things versus your really close friendships or relationships, or your family, or your music, it all interweaves and adds up as the story goes on."

Ah yes, the music. The audio will be an important part of *Goodbye Volcano High* ("we think audio and music is what makes an emotional lasting connection," says Dabbous). Fang is in a band, VVORM DRAMA, with their best friend Trish – and their music will be featured in the game. The idea of potentially prioritising the band over personal relationships is certainly a very interesting one.

It's the nature of KO_OP as an artist-owned and -run studio, though, which gives *Goodbye Volcano High* its true heart. There have been no barriers to infusing the game with the identities of the people who made it. "[KO_OP is] made up of a lot of queer people, and a lot of trans people," says Dabbous. "We're able to have those elements be a part of the world and the story and the characters ... we don't have to fight for that, and we don't have to necessarily centre that either. They're just a part of our world as a given."

THIS IS THE END

Development began in 2018, and the idea was always to give the story something of an apocalyptic vibe. The end of an era in terms of graduation from high school; the fact that the characters are dinosaurs, which as we know went extinct; the pressures of making important life choices... stress, endings, and the unknown were always in the mix. And then, 2020 happened.

NEW INFO

"Since [2018] things [have become] more and more dire, in terms of just like our political climate, our ecological crisis," explains Dabbous. "There's a lot of things out there that feel like these looming huge issues that are almost cataclysmic, right? And we're just like, OK, what is our responsibility as creators to tell narratives that capture this feeling in time? ... I think that we're trying to ask ourselves, like, what does it mean to exist at the end of an era? What does it look like? And what is your personal responsibility?"

The coronavirus pandemic has proven to be an instructive lesson in how humans react to cataclysmic events (for good or bad), but it also means, as Dabbous puts it, "We have to make sure that it's not read as a straight COVID [commentary]." McKernan adds, "I think that a really interesting balance to try to strike, is that we're trying to treat the subject as responsibly as we can and with as much weight as it warrants, while still having our own kind of world."

Luke Kemp

"WE THINK AUDIO AND MUSIC IS WHAT MAKES AN EMOTIONAL LASTING CONNECTION"

Tails round the campfire.

Goodbye Volcano High

History must be a pretty short course.

It's not all doom and gloom, there will be laughter as well.

COMEBACK KING

Hunt down a legend as his arch-nemesis in **KING ARTHUR: KNIGHT'S TALE**

By Fraser Brown

actical RPG *King Arthur: Knight's Tale* begins with an ending. The legendary monarch's adventures, love triangles, and battles are behind him – we've heard them all before – and the future's looking grim. Because he's dead. His killer, Mordred, is right behind him. A two-for-one deal. But thanks to magic, the rivalry is far from over.

Magic has stopped Arthur from passing on, instead turning him into a source of corruption threatening the misty and mystical isle of Avalon. The Lady of the Lake, not one for original ideas, decides to bring back Mordred, too, tasking him with re-killing his corpse-king, but only after an appropriate series of trials, tribulations, and turn-based scraps.

"King Arthur is an iconic character, familiar to most people, and his whole mythology is a trove of fascinating stories and heroes," says NeocoreGames narrative designer Viktor Juhász. "He also has been subject to numerous interpretations for centuries, and these highly different variations provide an excellent background to create our own mythology that also remains true to the core of the myth."

So the old king is now the Big Bad, with Mordred usurping the role of hero. Kinda. While Neocore cites *XCOM* as the progenitor of its battle system, outside of these fights you'll find moral conundrums and character development that promises to do more than just change your stats. Maybe you'll redeem the blackguard, if you can withstand the seductive lure of being a titanic arsehole.

KINGDOM COME

This isn't the first time the studio has built a game around the Arthurian myths, or even the second. In 2009, it released *King Arthur – The Role-playing Wargame*, followed by a sequel in 2012. Both tried to capture the dramatic battles of *Total War*, but with magic and roleplaying flung into the mix. While it shares a logo and a setting, *Knight's Tale* isn't a direct continuation of the series – but it does speak to the studio's fascination with these stories.

While Neocore is taking Arthur and Mordred down a new path, naturally there are nods to the classic myths and previous games. While it's all set in Avalon, rather than Britannia, you'll still be able to hang around in Camelot. And to help Mordred with his quest, he'll be able to recruit knights and allies for a new Round Table. The classics don't, apparently, go out of style.

"Camelot will be our main base of operations," Juhász explains. "This will be the place where we go back in-between battles, either to build something, or to manage our heroes. We'll be able to construct various buildings and upgrade them as well. Every building in Camelot will serve a purpose, from recruiting new heroes to the Round Table, to healing them or removing curses. Some buildings will also grant passive bonuses in battle and outside of it, and players will of course be able to build upgrades to their existing buildings."

Oh yes, it's a management game too. You will be busy. With Arthur corrupting Avalon, Mordred gets to run his old castle, sitting on the throne and getting up to all that kingly business. Along with all the construction and recruitment efforts, you'll also be able to set laws, fill up your treasure room with tributes and figure out what kind of ruler you want to be. Here, morality once again crops up. You can dabble in tyranny, squeezing people for all their cash, or you can play the part of a righteous ruler, establishing laws that gives you a slow and steady income without upsetting the people under your care.

PALADIN PALS

While videogame morality usually ends up binary, *Knight's Tale*

KNIGHT SCHOOL

Three of the classes joining the new Round Table

DEFENDERS
Tanky heroes who can take a beating thanks to their armour and shield, but still dish it out with their one-handed weapon.

CHAMPIONS
The damage dealers of the crew, who can carve a path through the battlefield with their deadly two-handed weapons.

ARCANISTS
Offensive magicians who can summon fire and cast curses that infect enemies. Unsurprisingly, this is Merlin's class.

LEFT: Typical archer, slinking off to hide in a corner.

RIGHT: I don't know what this is, but it has way too many horns.

BELOW: He wears spikes because he's afraid of intimacy.

determines your alignment with two axes. There's the righteousness-tyranny axis, but there's also an Old Faith-Christianity axis, reflecting the battle for souls. The popular Arthurian myths depict the Knights of the Round Table as Christian, but they are filled to the brim with pagan holdovers. Arthur's exploits are usually placed within the 5th or 6th century AD, at a time when the British Isles contained plenty of Christians, but also plenty of pagans, especially among the Anglo-Saxon invaders. Depending on the myth or retelling, Arthur can be on either

WITH ARTHUR CORRUPTING AVALON, MORDRED GETS TO RUN HIS OLD CASTLE

side, and it looks like Mordred is just as flexible. In *Knight's Tale*, this decision determines various things, from who you can recruit, to the tricks you'll use in combat.

"Choices made throughout the campaign will influence your standing on this chart, which will in turn shape the narrative of the playthrough," Juhász says. "Some heroes and abilities may only be available to specific alignments – such as Morgan le Fay, who will only join you if you lean towards Old Faith and her followers trust you enough to offer a quest. Your standing on the Morality Chart will also influence how the game ends, increasing *Knight's Tale*'s replayability even more."

To kill Arthur for a second time, you'll need to make a lot of friends. More than 30 heroes can be recruited, each of them a unique character, even when they're the same class. You can have tanky Defenders, ranged Marksmen and multiple magic classes, but the heroes will also have distinct skills, and can then be further enhanced by unique items. These aren't just knights, either. Other familiar faces, like the aforementioned Morgan le Fay, will join your crusade, if they like you enough.

MORE THAN 30 HEROES CAN BE RECRUITED, EACH OF THEM A UNIQUE CHARACTER

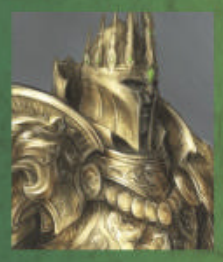
Like Mordred, everyone you recruit will have an alignment, as well as a distinct personality, which means that you'll need to keep them placated even after they've joined your crew. If you decide that the only solution to a village cursed with a plague is burning the whole thing down, some of your mates might feel a little bit uncomfortable about that. Others might let you use their matches. Eventually, the ones less enamoured with your decisions might choose to leave your service entirely. You'll have to be a bit diplomatic, then, perhaps curtailing your bloodlust to make sure your favourite warrior doesn't run off in a bad huff.

MONSTER MASH

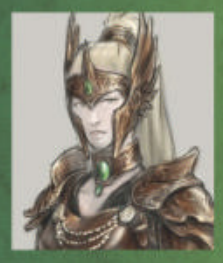
Beyond the stronghold of Camelot is Avalon, where all your questing will take place. Quests will send you to maps both random and bespoke, containing a mix of turn-based battles, NPCs that need your help, surprise events and points of interest to explore. The island is looking a bit worse for wear these

WHO'S WHO

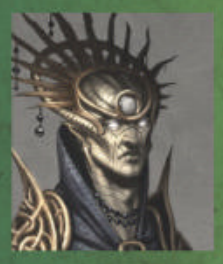
Avalon's big names



ARTHUR
Trapped between life and death, he's pissed off and is taking it out on Avalon, spreading a magical corruption.



GUINEVERE
Arthur's ex, who also has a thing for sexy French knights. It looks like she's been dabbling in magic, and is now a sage.



NUADA
A god and first king of the Tuatha Dé Danann, a race of supernatural beings with a long rivalry with the Formorians.

BALOR
Even after you defeat Arthur, you'll still have this dude to deal with. He's the King of the Formorians and a bit of a dick.

ABOVE: I think this is just *a* round table, not *the* Round Table. It's a bit small.

LEFT: Think you've got enough skulls there, big fella?

days, shrouded in mist and covered in rot. There are, as you might expect, plenty of monsters, ranging from zombies that can be dispatched effortlessly, to powerful Formorians, and less fantastical foes like Picts. They're all part of the game's seven enemy factions, each connected to Arthurian tales and folklore from across the British Isles.

Some enemies can rise from the dead even after they've been put down, others can summon allies, brigands can lay traps – there's around 50 different enemy types that you'll encounter, and then bosses on top of that. You'll have plenty of tricks of your own, too, of course. Charging at an enemy with a shield can knock them back, letting you manipulate the battlefield, or you can use a spot of magic to weaken them before you send in your heavy-hitters. And just like some of your foes, some of your pals will be able to lay traps and lure enemies into them.

Exploration happens in real-time, but when you bump into some enemies then the action switches to turn-based. Some take place in more confined grids, where trees and other obstacles force you to get stuck in right away; other fights are spread out and teeming with foes, forcing you to spread your forces more thinly. Thankfully, if you've got a lot of ground to cover, you can use all your action points on movement, rushing across the map and sacrificing your chance to attack that turn.

TOP: You really should clean up the corpse pile before guests arrive.

LEFT: The flora and fauna of Avalon has gotten a bit... weird.

DOUBLE DEAD

In a game where both the protagonist and antagonist have been killed but are still hanging around, you might not think death is a big deal, but that would be a fatal mistake. All of your crew can die mid-adventure, including Mordred. And once that happens, they're gone for good. You can recover from losing a knight, but if Mordred dies then you're screwed.

Making sure they're all geared up will help them last longer. "This is where our experience as an RPG developer comes in," says Juhász. "The gearing and itemisation system will be similar to CRPGs, with gear slots on each hero, we'll have different item rarity types and we'll also have many, many different kinds of artefacts. The stats on them won't be randomised, but instead we'll have literally thousands of them."

Since the last time it hung out with King Arthur, Neocore has made several action-RPGs, including *The Incredible Adventures of Van Helsing* and *Warhammer 40,000: Inquisitor*, so it's got lots of history with conjuring up absolute truckloads of gear. All of your heroes will be able to equip weapons and armour, mostly tied to classes and then enhanced by runes, and then other slots give you a bit more freedom to experiment with items that aren't locked into any specific role.

Knight's Tale was Kickstarted only a few months ago, but Neocore is pretty eager to get people into Avalon, so it's also hosting an Early Access phase. It seems like an ambitiously quick turnaround. Juhász says it will feature the start of the story campaign and a few sidequests, but the main aim is to get feedback on the tactical combat. From there, Neocore will release thematic updates that include things like the Camelot management layer and the full progression system. These should appear "regularly" after it launches in Early Access on January 12. ■

Thermaltake shows off its 2021 range

GREAT GEAR FOR THE DISCERNING GAMER.

ABOVE: Both triangular panels on the Divider 300 TG ARGB are removable.

Thermaltake, one of the premier manufacturers in PC parts and peripherals, is gearing up for an enormous 2021. During January's Thermaltake Expo the company showcased a huge, impressive range of releases for 2021. Between some spectacular new cases (including a new mini chassis), some incredible innovations in cooling, and a range of powerful and brilliant peripherals, PC gamers looking to step up their gaming set-up need look no further.

CASE PERFECTION

Thermaltake is known for having some of the coolest and best cases on the market, and in 2021 the company has iterated on itsclassic designs based on user feedback, crafting incredible new chassis for the discerning builder. The Tower 100 Mini Chassis (available now) is a smaller case for anyone looking to build a PC that's perfect if you have space restrictions or want your system to be portable. With a height of just 462.8mm, it's proof that good things come in small packages: you can even fit an RTX-series card in there. This case also is built to show off your parts: 4mm tempered glass windows look right into the case, which features two preinstalled 120mm fans on top and at the rear for exhaust. It's constructed from solid steel and designed to extract heat like a chimney, with superior dust filtration and a dismantlable modular body, making this a small chassis with huge potential. It comes in Black and Snow editions. If you're after a bigger case for a heftier build, the Divider Series, including the Divider 300 TG ARGB Mid Tower (available now), is ideal. This case, which also features tempered glass windows, has enough space to support a standard ATX motherboard, and features three 120mm 5V ARGB front fans built in. The chassis has a distinct, beautiful look, with a triangular steel panel running alongside the glass on one side. Both this and the glass panel are easy to remove and tool-free, and they look fantastic. Not only does the tower feature amazing ventilation, it's also compatible with RGB motherboard software from numerous manufacturers, letting you set up a stunning lightshow (and those front fans are compatible, too). A PSU cover and GPU riser support bracket make it easier to set up your build, and rotational PCI-E slots let you choose whether you want to display your graphics card vertically or horizontally. This brilliant case is built for excellent ventilation and will work with any cooling system you might want to use, whether that means fan or liquid cooling. Like the Tower 100, it's available in Black and Snow variants.

BELOW: The Tower 100 Mini Chassis is compact, but roomy enough for a powerful build.

COOL HORIZONS

If you're looking to outfit your new case with a liquid cooler, you can't go past the ToughLiquid Ultra AIO (Q2 2021). This cooler is Thermaltake's first model to sport an LCD monitor, which is attached to the waterblock and can be used to monitor the system's temperature, track multiple hardware components, or even run custom GIFs. Set this up in a glass-sided tower and you'll be able

to track your PC's performance as you push it, while also keeping your system cool. Its radiator is built for thermal efficiency, and the integrated water pump features a copper base plate, which means it can stand extreme heats while pumping out liquid. This isn't a system that requires frequent maintenance, and high-quality components mean that it's made to last a long time. 240mm and 360mm models are available, depending on the needs of your set-up. This is one of several new liquid coolers coming from Thermaltake in 2021: also look out for the Toughliquid 240/280/360 ARGB Sync AIO and the beefed-up Floe RC Ultra 240/360 CPU & Memory AIO Liquid Cooler. Whatever your liquid cooling needs, Thermaltake has you covered.

ABOVE: Thermaltake's Argent series offers everything you need to game smarter.

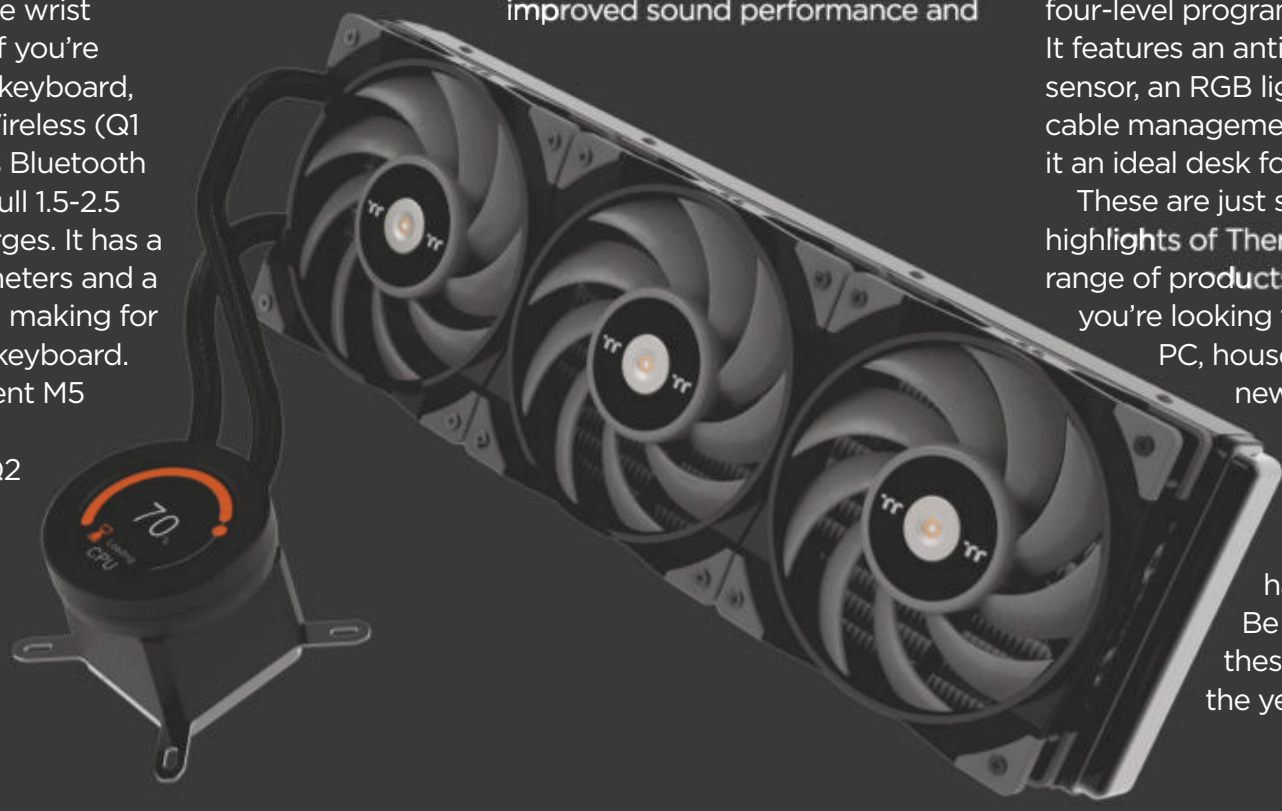
ABOVE: The Argenty M5 mouse comes in both wired and wireless models.

POWER AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

Thermaltake has unveiled an exciting range of peripherals for 2021, including their first new wireless products in several years. The Argent series will help you be the best player you can be – after all, a powerful PC won't help you if your keyboard, mouse, and headset aren't up to the task. Thermaltake's flagship keyboard for 2021 is the Argent K5 (Q1 2021), a mechanical keyboard with some incredible light-up, switchable keys and a strong build quality. The K5 features an aluminium top plate that houses its brilliantly clicky keys, including dedicated multimedia keys and a volume roller built in. The K5 features 13 unique dynamic lighting effects that you can play around with, as well as a detachable wrist rest made of leather. If you're looking for a wireless keyboard, look out for the W1 Wireless (Q1 2021), which supports Bluetooth 4.2 and will run for a full 1.5-2.5 months between charges. It has a wireless range of 10 meters and a dedicated pairing key, making for an extremely flexible keyboard.

The upcoming Argent M5 mouse (Q1 2021) and Argent H5 headset (Q2 2021) both come in wired and wireless variants, depending on your needs. The M5 is built to last for 50 million clicks, and features 64kb flash memory alongside 16.8 million colour illuminations, which can be synced up with the rest of your PC for a true lightshow. It sports a matte coating outer layer across both models, and the sensitivity can be adjusted between 100 and 16,000 DPI. Eight programmable buttons mean you'll be able to absolutely dominate your opponents online after setting up some presets. The H5 headset uses a hi-res driver for improved sound performance and features plush memory foam over the adjustable ear pads for comfort. The bi-directional microphone will let you communicate with teammates easily, and the DTS surround sound is balanced against chat so that you never miss a thing.

BELOW: Thermaltake's ToughLiquid Ultra 240-360 AIO provides effective and attractive cooling.



If you're looking to overhaul your whole gaming set-up, Thermaltake is also releasing the Argent E700 Gaming Desk (Q3 2021). This desk can bear weights up to 150kg, and lets you adjust its height via a four-level programmable controller. It features an anti-collision safety sensor, an RGB lighting strip, and a cable management system, making it an ideal desk for your PC set-up.

These are just some of the highlights of Thermaltake's huge range of products for 2021. Whether you're looking to build a new PC, house your PC in a new case, or improve your gameplay experience, Thermaltake's new lines for this year have you covered. Be on the lookout as these drop throughout the year.

Games

YOUR GUIDE TO THE LATEST PC GAMES.

GAMES THIS ISSUE

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SCORING SYSTEM

PCPP scores its games on a 1 to 100 scale. The higher, the better – though 100 is by no means a "perfect" game. We're not convinced such a thing exists, so consider a 100 a masterpiece of PC gaming, despite its inevitable flaws. A 50 is a decidedly average game; one that doesn't excel in any particular area, without being an affront to our senses – the ultimate in mediocrity. Below this, you'll start to find the games our reviewers suffered an aneurysm getting through; above it, the titles truly worth your time and money. And remember: a score is only a vague indication of quality. Always read the full review for the definitive opinion!

POWERED BY
REPUBLIC OF GAMERS

NEUROJANK

CYBERPUNK 2077 delivers an incredible setting undermined by an onslaught of bugs. ***By James Davenport***

I'm on an aimless walking tour of Night City. Somehow I've ended up in the Japantown neighbourhood's Arasaka-financed streets, where animated billboards for 'Sweet Clean Speed' and pornographic braindances climb the flanks of utilitarian skyscrapers, blotting out the stars with a rainbow of neon. I pass a ramen shop, a hot dog stand, and a man selling spice, piles of garbage tucked beneath the offramp behind him. A mob of Christians gather at a nearby intersection, screaming "Blasphemers!" at the cops.

A voice makes booming proclamations in Japanese from loudspeakers overhead, flying cars crisscross the invisible roads between buildings. The sky glows with light pollution, but the moon is full and clear. It's a beautiful night.

I just left Judy Alvarez's place. My friend's been through a lot lately. Someone close to her has been victim to a string of horrors. We had a big heart-to-heart, undermined by the presence of arm-knife crosshairs fixed on her forehead even though I put my arm-knives away earlier (I'm polite like that). There was also the notification from that fancy sniper rifle I picked up 20 minutes ago somehow still hanging around.

But hey, Judy's not perfect either. I've seen her clip through chairs and float across the room while confessing something deeply personal. And yet, I am duty bound to stick through the bugs for my friend. I genuinely care for her.

She's on my mind while I continue my walk. A streetlamp floats in the air, its base failing to load. A busker plays an invisible guitar. The facade of a skyscraper flickers. I call my car and it arrives, clipping through a barrier. Should I call Judy, see if she's hanging in there?

There won't be another open world like this for a long time

It's just another day in *Cyberpunk 2077*, a pretty good RPG in an amazing setting totally sick with bugs.

GLITCH HUNT

There won't be another open world like this for a long time. I love wandering the mountains of trash on the outskirts of town, cutting pretty silhouettes from a distance. Sometimes the smog gets so thick around the old Arasaka memorial downtown you can't see the tops of buildings, everything washed in dirty orange light. I watched traffic here for quite some time.

Take a microscope to it and you'll see the seams instantly. NPCs are aimless automatons or carefully posed puppets. I've seen the same guy splayed out on a couch playing guitar all over the city. I made the mistake of stopping to inspect a roadside rave in the Badlands, only to realise there were three sets of triplets in attendance. Sometimes far off textures load in a touch too late, or the five o'clock rush hour snaps into existence in front of your eyes. Night City is a stage, not a simulation.

But if you keep your eyes trained ahead, every frame is a striking, lively scene. Night City is nearly unparalleled among other open worlds at middle to long distances. In fact, I'd pay full price just to walk around and take photos. It's an incredible work that the stories within never quite measure up to.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world action RPG set in the near future

DEVELOPER
CD Projekt Red

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
i9-9900k, RTX 2080, 16GB RAM, installed on SSD

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
cyberpunk.net

HEAD CASE

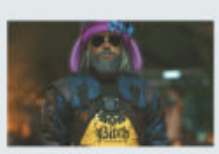
Cyberpunk's main quest is full of interesting ideas, but marred by inconsistent characterisation and focus. Johnny Sliverhand, played by a grumpy Keanu Reeves, and you, a merc for hire named V, are centerstage. As V, you witness a top level corporate assassination and are forced to work with Johnny to expose the truth and save V's life. Early on a backup of Johnny Silverhand's consciousness ends up in V's head and begins to take over his mind, effectively overwriting V.

The effect Johnny has on V, and the equal and potentially opposite or compounding effect V has on Johnny, is the heart of the RPG decision-making here. Johnny is a repulsive, crude misogynist. And you can change that, assuming he doesn't swing you his way first. I had no clue whether to take my pills to suppress the maniac in my head or to try and change him – the ambiguous and agonising choice I want in an RPG.

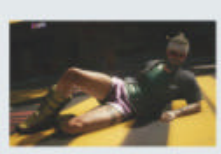
I just wish Johnny's characterisation stayed on track. While I'd make major progressions in our relationship in the main quest, he'd regularly revert to the same old dickhead Johnny in sidequests. I loved where our relationship eventually ended up, but *Cyberpunk 2077* didn't really show me the work it took to get there.

As a basic, adaptable foil for V, Johnny is a nice engine for introspection. Capitalism is bad, for

V WHO YOU WANNA V *Five looks from rad to bad*

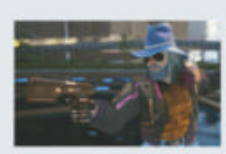


COLONEL BITCH
At ease, baby. Take in the gloriousness of my hat.



DISCO V
I've sadly long out-levelled these booty shorts.

MASTERMIND V
My hair disappears in the mirror. It's a dark portent.



WASHED UP PI V
There are crumbs in the beard in my head canon.

TURBO COP
Halt! In the name of the look! Fashion police at it again.

Vehicle dashes are lovely to look at.

Expect to see some familiar faces.

Judy gets some bad news.

I love all the little scenes strewn about.

The city looks amazing in the evening light.

sure, but *Cyberpunk* isn't interested in solving that problem. The focus is on people and how they persist (or don't) in the muck.

Yeah, the story is wrapped up in espionage, sabotage, and conspiracy at the highest order. But it's driven by V's basic human motivations. He doesn't want to die (I played as a man), he doesn't want to lose his consciousness to Johnny, and he wants to make something of himself. Depending on your decisions the stakes change in major ways.

Me? I took on the personal mission to become a reformed Corpo dorko, dreaming of getting out of the city and living a simpler life. And, to my surprise, *Cyberpunk* supported an eerily appropriate arc for me, a testament to the sprawling narrative choices laid out under the skin.

And I wouldn't have seen any of it if I skipped the side missions. While entirely optional, seeing through every side character's story to the end can fundamentally change how the larger story wraps. I spent a long time with Panam, a perky, stubborn nomad vying for respect among her peers, and days deeply investigating Johnny's tragic past. I befriended a beat cop hunting down a serial killer using surreal, invasive means in what might be my favourite quest.

OUT AND ABOUT

Night City sightseeing

1 BIOTECHNICA
Check out this lovely hive of protein farmers.

2 CORPO PLAZA
Goldfish made of light? Maybe capitalism is good.

3 NIGHT CITY VIEWPOINT
You can see it all from up here.

4 NORTH OAK SHRINE
A nice historical contrast, the shrine set against the city.

5 TRASH MOUNTAIN
Looks bad and good all at the same time!

SIDE HUSTLE

The deeper sidequests are infrequent, too difficult to separate from the endless warehouse infiltrations, but they're all good to great, and some are up there with CD Projects' best, even if there's no clear Bloody Baron standout.

Too bad almost every serious dramatic beat was undercut by some kind of bug, ranging from a UI crowded by notifications and crosshairs failing to disappear, to full-on scripting errors. Most are audiovisual tics, like the sound of a car loudly peeling out wailing on during a long drive as a passenger with an NPC, a character passing through solid elevator doors, or random objects floating mid-air. They're the kind of thing I can squint through on occasion, but there wasn't a single quest in which something wacky didn't happen. The good news is that all this stuff can be fixed, but it also means the ideal *Cyberpunk 2077* is delayed again, in spirit.

Almost every dramatic beat was undercut by some kind of bug

The action holds together well enough. Weapons and armour have unique stats, though it's all pretty easily reduced to how much damage you can do and withstand versus the level of the enemies you're facing. It's exciting stuff in the early hours, all those stats and weapons laid out before you, but the bottom drops out pretty quickly.

Night City is stuffed with warehouses, armouries and secret labs, but the objectives bleed together quickly because the means tend to repeat too. I wanted to be a cyber ninja at first, using quickhacks to turn off cameras, destroy turrets, and blind my enemies before moving in with my katana and hacking them to bits. Things went well for a while, but pouring all my experience and perk points into blades made me nearly unkillable within a few hours.

Enemy AI is rote. Stealth is a game of vision cones and patrol routes, with nearly no meaningful distinctions between gangs and corporations. Now I slide into the room in slow motion and headshot a few grunts before I even come to a stop. I clean up with my arm knives, snipping limbs off like paper dolls. But I'm showing off for the sake of it, not because *Cyberpunk* is encouraging me to use every tool in the box.

The gunplay feels great though: heads pop and limbs dissolve, shotguns knock enemies on their cyberbutts. For the quieter players, there's always a hidden sewer grate or balcony door to discover. But without any meaningful variations on enemy or level design after the first few hours, *Cyberpunk* is missing the incentive to experiment with it all.

Sure, *The Witcher 3* was funnier and more subversive, but I'm taken by how hopeful *Cyberpunk* is. Its exploration of the future relies heavily on genre tropes, with everyone from punks to dirty cops playing the parts established back in William Gibson's Neuromancer. But *Cyberpunk 2077* remains a faithful treatment of the genre.

I found it life-affirming in the final moments, even in the face of certain death and an onslaught of bugs. I suppose it's an appropriate thematic throughline: *Cyberpunk 2077* is a game about V coming apart at the seams, in a city coming apart at the seams, in a game coming apart at the seams. Play it after a few months of patches. ■

owerPlay VERDICT

Some nice stories nested in an astounding open world, undercut by jarring bugs and shallow progression.

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DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

The questing is tedious, but WORLD OF WARCRAFT: SHADOWLANDS is another great *WoW* expansion. *By Steven Messner*

S*hadowlands* is one of *World of Warcraft*'s most ambitious expansions yet. There are times where I feel a little overwhelmed by all of its complex progression systems. When I'm not chipping away at expanding my Covenant's Sanctum, I'm exploring its dark and dangerous new endgame zone or climbing the endless floors of Torghast. And then there's the familiar grind of world quests, dungeons, and chasing down hidden treasures like new mounts.

It's a lot to stay on top of and at times a little too familiar, but much of *Shadowlands*' endgame is varied and inventive enough to keep things fun. It might not win over jaded players who drifted away over the years, but *Shadowlands* is the best *World of Warcraft* has been in a long while.

The new expansion makes some huge improvements over the previous pack, *Battle for Azeroth*. There's no more infinite grind to breathlessly chase. There's no opaque armour system like Azerite Armor to suck the joy out of getting that coveted loot drop from a dungeon boss. And, best of all, a lot of randomness has been dialled back in favour of player choice. Instead of spending weeks praying for a specific, all-powerful Legendary item to drop only to get one that's useless to me, I can farm the materials for the one I want and build it myself. It's empowering to be the one calling the shots instead of feeling beholden to the fickle gods of randomness.

It's one of the biggest decisions I've made since my race and class

This emphasis on player choice is most evident in Covenants, which are basically Hogwarts' houses if each was a distinct afterlife where souls are sent to live for all eternity. So instead of Slytherin you get Maldraxxus, a hellscape of green where Necrolord armies battle in the Theater of Pain. Or Ardenweald, a cosmic forest where spirits are nurtured in ghost gardens.

THE LOST AND DAMNED

All these new factions are introduced through a 15-hour story campaign, but I found it really difficult to care. The quest design is varied but there's no challenge to it, which sucks all the tension out of the story when I melt a big boss in seconds without getting so much as a scratch.

Once players wrap up the story and reach level 60, they'll have to choose one of the four Covenants to join up with. Each one not only offers a different endgame story campaign, but two unique (and very powerful) abilities, armour sets, mounts, and even fun side activities like a soul garden to tend or a forge where you can assemble your own Frankenstein-esque Abominations. It's one of the biggest decisions I've made in *WoW* since choosing my race and class, and I love how much weight it carries.

As a Venthyr, I'm chilling out in my vampire lair, using blood mirrors to travel around the ruinous castles of Revendreth. If I had gone with Maldraxxus, though, my sanctum would be inside a colossal statue of their god. *World of Warcraft*'s story might fizzle more than it pops, but its worldbuilding is still cool as hell.

And then there's the crowning achievement of *Shadowlands*: Torghast. It's a roguelike dungeon that changes each time you enter it. Like any good roguelike, the real joy comes from slowly acquiring ridiculous powers that warp my character into a killing machine. There's hundreds to find, but I've found powers that transform me into a giant, make me temporarily blind in exchange for vastly increasing my damage, and one that turns me into a tiny rat so I can sneak past enemies.

Unlike *Battle for Azeroth*, a lot of *Shadowlands*' new features are fun and rewarding. The four new zones are dense with surprises and treasures, Covenants are an exciting way to customise my character, and I'm enjoying the worldbuilding now that the campaign is over. It may not rekindle a second *World of Warcraft* renaissance, but it's a confident step back in the right direction. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An expansion that takes players to *WoW*'s afterlife

DEVELOPER
Blizzard Entertainment

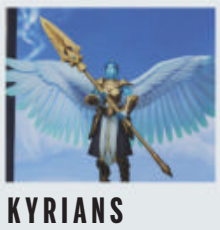
PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
i7 8700, RTX 2070, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
MMO

LINK
worldofwarcraft.com

LIFE AFTER DEATH *Shadowlands' four Covenants*



KYRIANS

Main ability: Summon an owl butler

Likes: Quiet contemplation

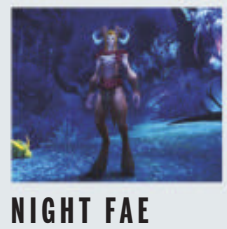
Dislikes: Disobedience

NECROLORDS

Main ability: Use nearby corpses to make a shield

Likes: Killing stuff, the colour green

Dislikes: Kyrians, life itself

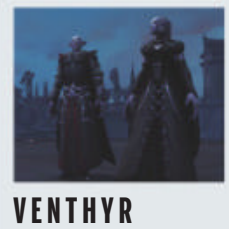


NIGHT FAE

Main ability: Transform into a fast spirit fox

Likes: Spirit horticulture

Dislikes: Climate change



VENTHYR

Main ability: Teleport 35 yards in any direction

Likes: Throwing posh vampire parties

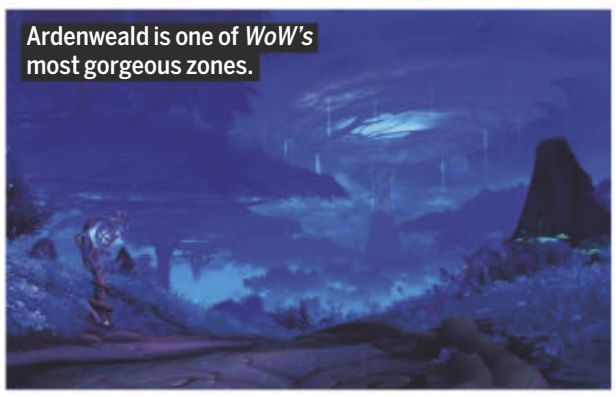
Dislikes: Humility

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Ambitious and grand, if a little uneven, *Shadowlands* is an exciting new step for *World of Warcraft*.

80

Jury's still out on whether or not freeing this dude is a good idea.


Ardenweald is one of *WoW's* most gorgeous zones.

World bosses are scary unless you bring friends.

Phearomones
Uncommon
Enemies damaged by your Death and Decay have a chance to cower in place for 3 sec.
Choose
Pouch of Phantasma
Common
Acquire 75 Phantasma.
Choose
Gnarled Key
Rare
Casting Door of Shadows reduces the cast time of Door of Shadows by 10%, and its cooldown by 3 sec. Stacks up to 10 times.
Choose
Hide
You frequently have to choose between different powers in Torghast.

Not bad for a 16-year-old game.

COLD CASE

TWIN MIRROR is a psychological mystery game that fails to go deeper than the surface. ***By Rachel Watts***

Leaving time travel, telekinesis, and mind reading to the wayside, Dontnod has stepped away from the supernatural themes of its previous games for *Twin Mirror*, a psychological-drama of mystery and conspiracy. This genre of game should be well within the studio's wheelhouse, but unfortunately, Dontnod's first self-published game is a little underwhelming. It has the set up of a great detective mystery, but its unwillingness to explore difficult topics with depth leaves it feeling shallow and half-baked.

Twin Mirror follows Sam Higgs, a former investigative journalist returning to his home town following the death of his best friend and fellow reporter, Nick. It isn't long before Sam gets caught up in a larger conspiracy involving the mining town's community, and he decides to follow the case until the end, which leads him deeper into the underlying secrets of his childhood home. To make matters worse, before he left town two years ago, Sam wrote an article exposing the lack of safety measures in the local mine which led to it being shut down, leaving many people jobless and angry.

There's bad blood brewing and after Sam arrives at the wake, Nick's daughter, and Sam's own goddaughter, confides in him that she thinks something about her father's death feels off. Presented with the possibility that his friend's death may have had a sinister dimension, Sam agrees to investigate.

Detective work plays out similarly to exploration in Dontnod's previous games. You're dropped into a new area and need to walk around examining objects and finding clues. The mining town has an unglamorous West Virginian charm that makes everywhere a joy to explore. Its dingy dive bars, mountain viewpoints, and cheap hotel rooms are packed with information about Basswood's residents and the tough times they've been through.

The process of gathering clues is far from streamlined, however. You always have to find evidence in a certain order, meaning that you'll be doing multiple laps of a scene until you discover things at the right time.

Dingy dive bars, and cheap hotel rooms packed with information

After gathering enough evidence, Sam will enter his mind palace (closing his eyes and thinking really, really hard) and these sequences are a highlight of the game. Using the information you've found, Sam will begin to recreate a timeline of events in the surreal and beautiful broken-glass world in his head. Mechanics similar tot his are now standard in many detective games, but Sam's analytical mind stands above the rest of them.

HEAD SCRATCHER

Even though the evidence gathering is flakey, I went into the rest of the game excited to uncover the secrets of the sleepy town of Basswood, but unfortunately the investigation never really cranks into gear – it barely gets going at all.

Even after Sam is confronted by angry townsfolk who are suffering because of his mine safety article, he never really engages with it head-on. Was it right to publish the truth at the cost of people losing their jobs? It's a tough question that the game sidesteps.

Never exploring these themes beyond the surface pretty much sums up *Twin Mirror*. From its vapid minigames to lacklustre dialogue, it never delves that deep into the topics it attempts to grapple with, and this includes Sam's 'double', a character who lives in his mind. Throughout the game, Dontnod makes multiple hints that Sam is on the autistic spectrum, and that his 'alter ego' is supposed to be some guardian angel figure who offers him advice in tricky social situations, but it's an idea that's handled too incompetently to resonate.

Dontnod might not have fallen into the condescending and misinformed tropes found in other media when representing autistic people, but there are certain story decisions that make Sam feel like a ghost of that portrayal. There's a total absence of commitment to this representation, and a complete lack of insight and understanding.

Twin Mirror feels like a string of scenes sewn together with thin narrative threads, and is a game that says nothing, lacking any sort of engagement to subjects that it alludes to. For a studio that is celebrated for being loud and clear about improving representation in games, *Twin Mirror* is a real misstep. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A psychological mystery set in a small West Virginian town

DEVELOPER
Dontnod

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
i5-2500K, 8GB RAM, GTX 670

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
dont-nod.com/en/projects

COMPANION CLUB

Every detective needs a Watson, and luckily for Sam he has three sidekicks helping him

ANNA
A fellow investigative journalist who helps track down leads, and as a bonus she doesn't write articles that upset whole towns.

THE DOUBLE
Who better to help you than yourself? The double helps navigate tricky conversations and can aid in getting information out of people.

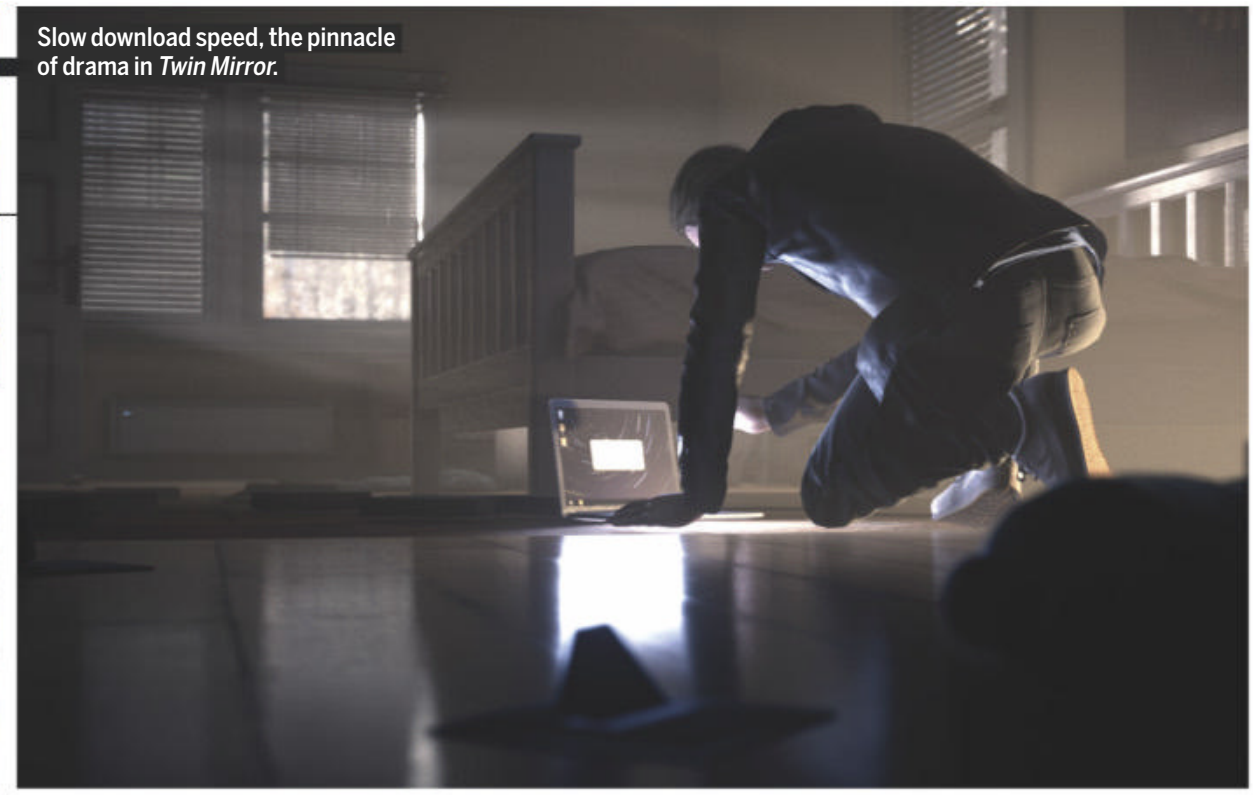
JOAN
The plucky young girl who first asks for Sam's help after she catches on that there could be more to her father's death than it first seems.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Twin Mirror kicks things off with an intriguing set-up but, disappointingly, ends up going absolutely nowhere with it.

52

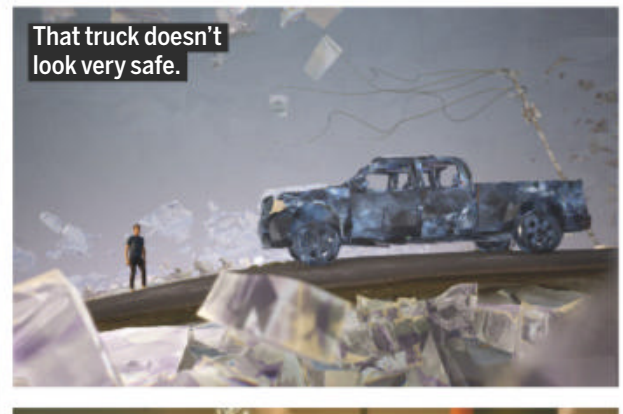
Sam's memories are formed from the glass shards in his mind palace.



Slow download speed, the pinnacle of drama in *Twin Mirror*.

If you like flashbacks in surreal voids, you're in luck..

Decisions may seem important but impact the game very little.



That truck doesn't look very safe.

CRIME DOESN'T PAY

EMPIRE OF SIN is ambitious, but undermined by a mountain of issues. ***By Fraser Brown***

I've got Feds breathing down my neck, a friend I need to betray, employees getting into love triangles and rivals making big plays – no wonder mob bosses end up a bit high-strung. There are times when *Empire of Sin*'s missions and emergent chaos collide to create a cyclone of compelling mobster drama full of intrigue, booze and bullets. Unfortunately, it mostly just gets in its own way, with systems tripping over each other or bugs dragging them down.

My attempts to become the biggest mob boss in 1920s Chicago haven't been foiled by the cops or my rivals, but by corrupt saves, broken missions and vanishing employees. Two campaigns ended up in the bin because of two entirely separate game-breaking issues. Even with access to the day one patch, I've encountered some significant problems, and they go a lot deeper than bugs.

Empire of Sin makes a good first impression, though. It's clearly born out of a fascination with the prohibition era, and as a management game it tries to capture the breadth of the illegal businesses and shady deals that kept these underground empires going – but it's even more interested in the people that join and run them. It's as much an RPG, and each boss has their own storyline and missions that lets you shape the kind of crook you want them to become.

Sit-downs are where *Empire of Sin*'s criminal cast really gets to shine, letting you meet rival bosses to shoot the shit and make deals. They're hammy and immensely fun conversations, taking advantage of each gangster's personality and history to create memorable verbal sparring matches. The illusion is shattered, unfortunately, when they offer completely random deals with terms that contradict each other, or when you realise that every deal is just a straightforward buff that costs you nothing.

Fights can break out inside businesses or on the streets

BOSS FIGHTS

Developing your boss and making deals is still a lot more entertaining than sitting at a desk, staring at messy art deco menus and stark maps. The day-to-day management of even the most crooked of casinos is not particularly scintillating, and while there are a few different ways to ensure your businesses flourish, like matching the booze to the affluence of the area, success mostly amounts to hostile takeovers and pouring excess cash into upgrades. Constant, unrelenting expansion is what wins the day, not business smarts. You're pushed to play aggressively, but doing so effectively neuters the entire management layer. Instead of supporting each other, the systems end up fighting for attention and pushing others out of the way.

A boss is nothing without goons. Here, you can create a criminal army, bung them into squads and tailor each of them for specific situations. It's light-years ahead of what you'd expect from a management game, until you get into the actual fights.

Fights can break out inside businesses or on the streets, and the most interesting thing about these impromptu battle arenas is that there's cover. It's just an endless parade of plain bars, warehouses and depressing brothels, where you'll mostly fight faceless enemies who go down in a couple of shots. Some abilities are so powerful that you can end a battle in one attack, and you'll quickly get unique weapons that eradicate any remaining challenge.

When you declare war on another boss, they immediately send their goons after your businesses. Usually that means controlling your unnamed guards – basically cannon fodder. Even the quick fights drag. The stakes couldn't be lower, either, because you can end a war and steal every business simply by sauntering into a safehouse and killing the boss in a slightly tougher but still pretty effortless battle. And that's the most effective way to win.

Empire of Sin is an ambitious management game that never manages to tie together its big ideas. There's a version of it in there somewhere that's good, but this one is just a bit of a mess. The potential is obvious, but it hasn't been realised. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Character-driven mob management in 1920s Chicago

DEVELOPER
Romero Games

PUBLISHER
Paradox Interactive

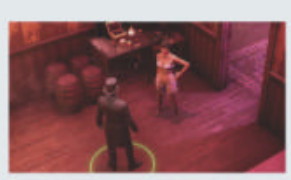
REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080 Ti, Intel i7-8086K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

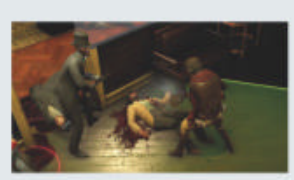
LINK
empireofsingame.com

VICE CITY *Your gangsters will develop lots of habits, not all good*

BOOZE
A barroom brawler can get an edge when boozed up, an alcoholic can become sober, and an angry person might become more aggressive.



STDs
Let your henchmen hang around in brothels too much and they'll catch STDs. In one unfortunate event, my gang got pubic lice, reducing their health.



MURDER
If you order your crew to execute a lot of injured enemies, their hearts will harden and they'll become cruel, making them more vicious in fights.

ROMANCE
It's all kisses and skipping through meadows until a partner is injured, at which point they might become enraged, or depressed if they're killed.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Empire of Sin's many bugs and competing systems undermine what could have been a novel mob management game.

49

Several bosses, like Daniel McKee Jackson, were real gangsters.

Nobody ever seems to be having a good time in your businesses.

The banter between rival bosses is a hammy highlight.

...Weak. Men like you will never run this city because your hearts are like paper. Others will crumple you and throw you in the garbage.

The walls needed a spot of colour, but not that much.

You can switch from real-time exploration to turn-based combat whenever you want.

GREEK CHIC

A puny mortal embarks on a quest to save the gods in **IMMORTALS FENYX RISING**, and finds yet another massive Ubisoft open world game. ***By Andy Kelly***

When Zeus banished the evil titan Typhon to Tartaros, an infinite abyss of torture and suffering, he thought that would be the end of it. But Typhon has escaped, stripping the gods who imprisoned him of their powers and wreaking havoc on their home, the Golden Isle. And so it falls to Fenyx, a lowly Greek soldier, to save them. Why? Because it's a good story. Fenyx is a normal person suddenly thrust into an outrageous world of gods and monsters. This grounds things nicely and makes for an enjoyable, and extreme, fish out of water story.

Immortals tells a big story with big stakes, but it's no Greek tragedy. It's a comedy, taking well-worn elements of Greek mythology and giving them a light-hearted, self-aware spin. The dialogue pokes fun at the legends, repaints familiar characters in amusing ways, and throws in anachronistic pop culture references. It's charming and often funny, if occasionally a little grating. Prometheus narrates as you play, with a goofy Zeus rudely butting in to mock his storytelling ability or demand he make things more exciting. This frequently results in things changing around Fenyx, like a cyclops suddenly doubling in size.

The mythical Golden Isle is a vivid, beautifully realised setting, with each region reflecting the god who lives there. Love goddess Aphrodite's corner of the island, the Valley of Eternal Spring, is an idyllic paradise of sparkling rivers, gleaming temples, frolicking animals and colourful flora. The Forgelands, home to metalworking god Hephaestus, is a mountainous, autumnal landscape littered with crumbling ruins, workshops and rusted automata. And at the heart of the island are the Gates of Tartaros, a lava-spewing volcanic fissure where, once you've rescued all four gods, you'll confront Typhon for a final showdown.

It's bright and striking, like a Saturday morning cartoon

This is one of Ubisoft's prettiest open worlds, and a nice alternative to the subdued realism of *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*. It's bright and striking, like a Saturday-morning cartoon, and the swaying grass and petals blowing in the wind have a real Studio Ghibli feel. Climb to the top of one of the many colossal statues on the island and the sense of scale is impressive. The breezy art style is a perfect fit for the game's light-hearted tone, and there's something really inviting about the world. You just want to dive in and explore every inch of it.

There are a few ways to get around the Golden Isle, all governed by a stamina system. You can climb on pretty much any surface for as long as your stamina meter holds out. If it gets dangerously low, drinking a potion will let you keep going a little while longer. You can creep up on animals – including a blue unicorn and a horse made of solid gold – and tame them, turning them into mounts. They have their own stamina meter, which varies in size from beast to beast. And when you discover the wings of Icarus early in the game, you can glide for long distances – again, for as long as you have stamina left.

But my biggest problem with *Immortals* is that none of these modes of navigation feel particularly good. The jumping is some of the worst I've experienced in a third-person game. It's frustratingly floaty and imprecise, making leaping between small platforms a chore. Gliding with the wings doesn't feel as graceful and smooth as it should. And when you gallop on a mount, the screen is smeared with way too much motion blur and you feel like you have to fight the controls to take a turn. It just never felt nice in my hands, even with a gamepad.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open-world game based on Greek mythology

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Quebec

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080 Super, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

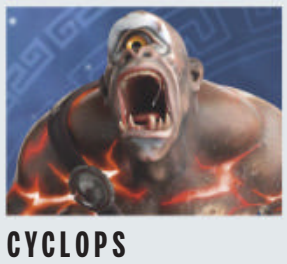
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
immortalsfenyxrising.com

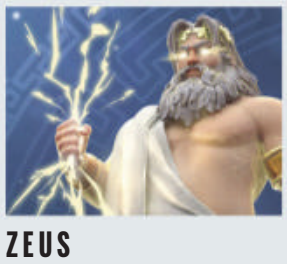
ARTEFACT FINDING

While we're on the subject of things I don't like, there are way too many collectables. As you sprint around the Golden Isle you're constantly picking things up, including Ambrosia, Zeus' Lightning, Coins of Charon, Golden Amber, blue, yellow, red, and purple Adamantine, flower nectar, Olympian figs, blue mushrooms and pomegranates. There are also four kinds of potion to craft, several large skill trees to work through, and an avalanche of loot, including weapons, armour and skins for Phosphor, your bird companion. It's »

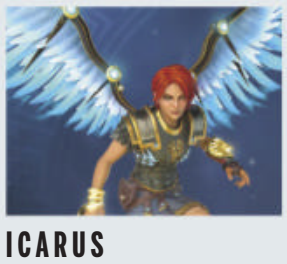
GODS AND MONSTERS *How* Immortals *riffs on famous Greek myths*



CYCLOPS
These creatures were unafraid of the gods – and they aren't afraid of Fenyx either, hurling huge boulders at her.



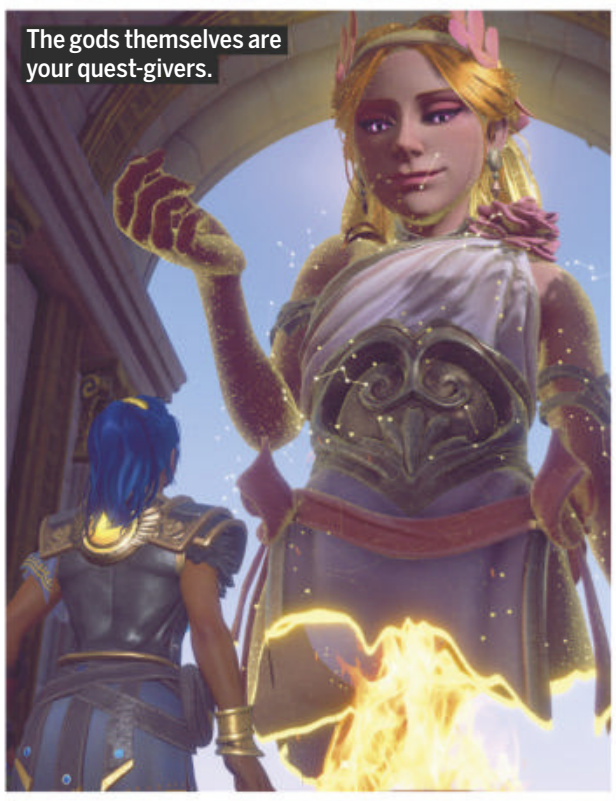
ZEUS
The thunder god looks badass in this art, but in the game he's a bit of a goofball, narrating Fenyx's adventure.



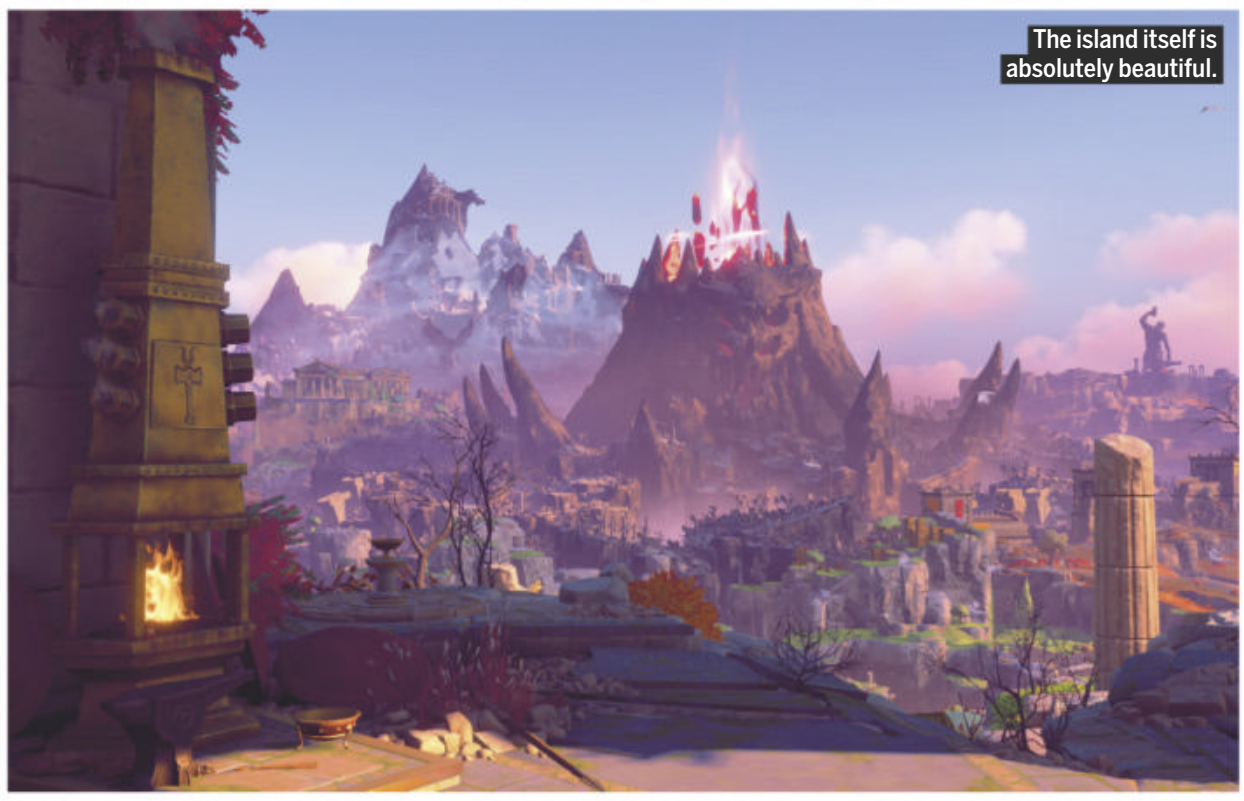
ICARUS
Early in the game Fenyx finds the wings Icarus flew too close to the sun with. Luckily that's not a problem in the game.

MINOTAUR
The bull-headed beast is an aggressive enemy, charging you with its horns, but also leaving itself open to attack.

Icarus: great craftsman, bad pilot.

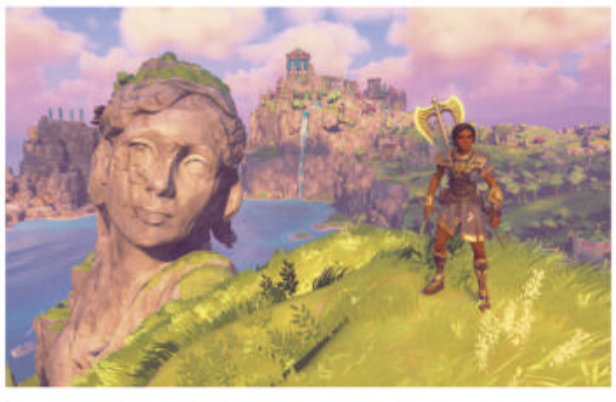


The gods themselves are your quest-givers.

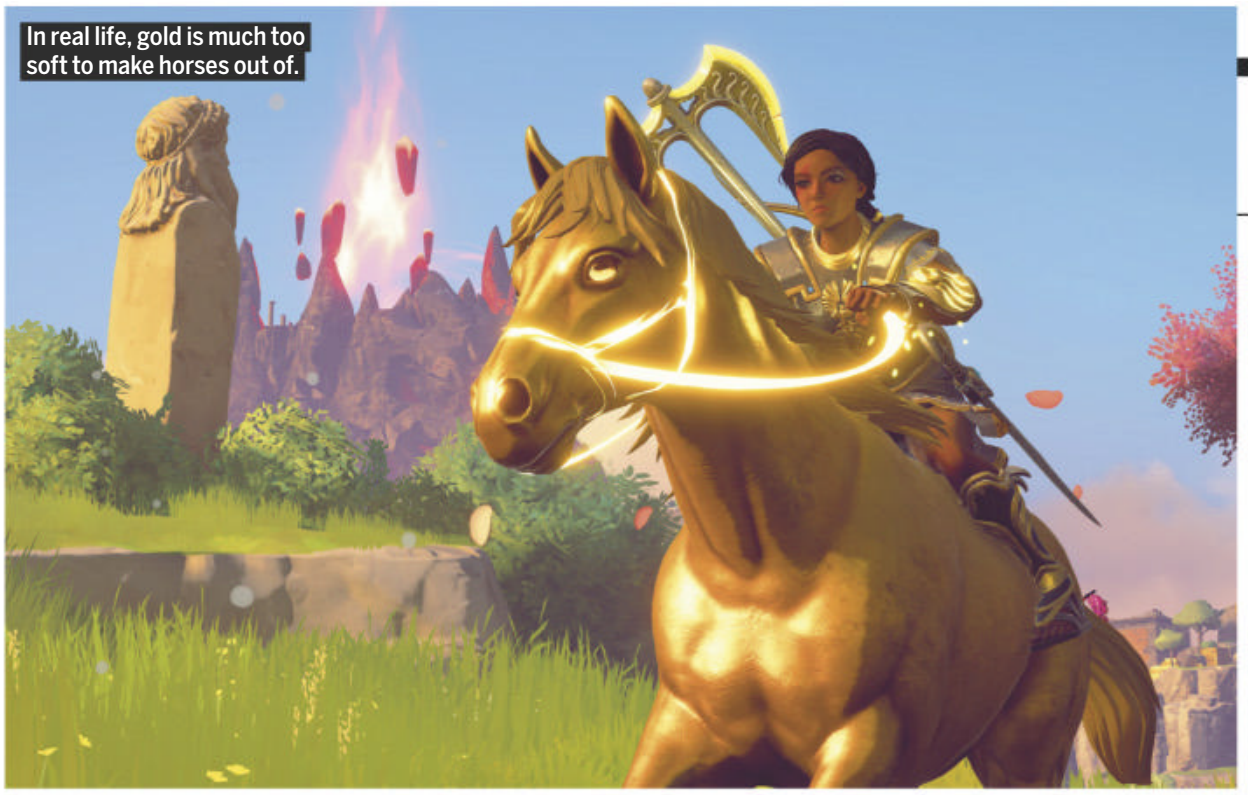


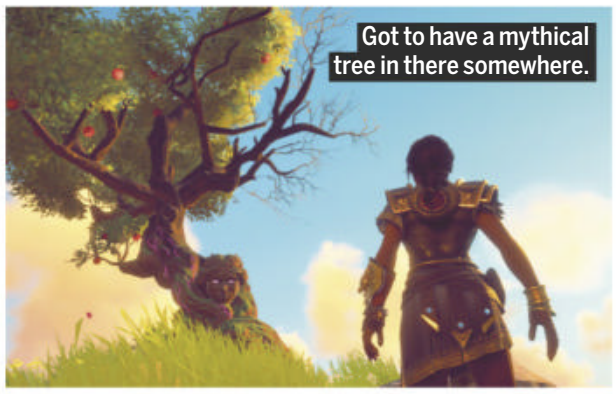
The island itself is absolutely beautiful.

Fenyx is fully customisable –and you can change their look mid-adventure.

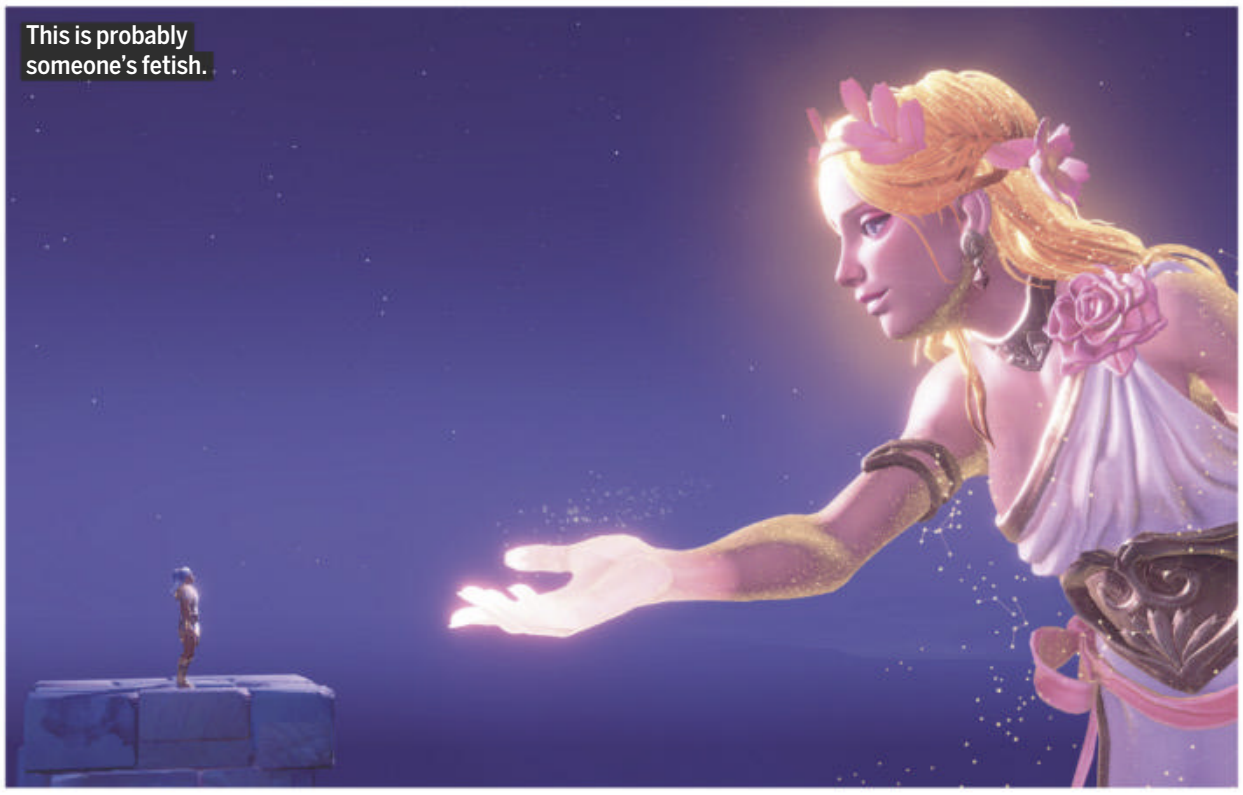


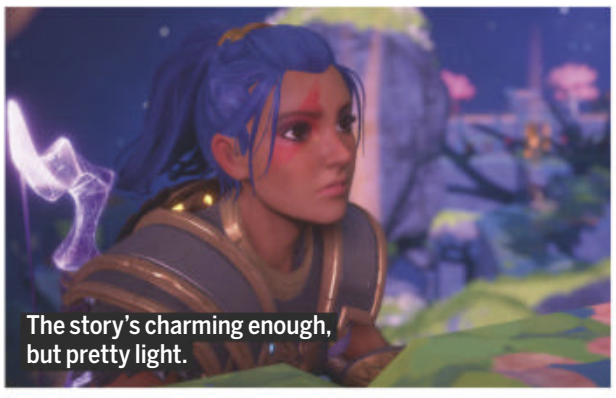
Swirly sky stuff is always evil.

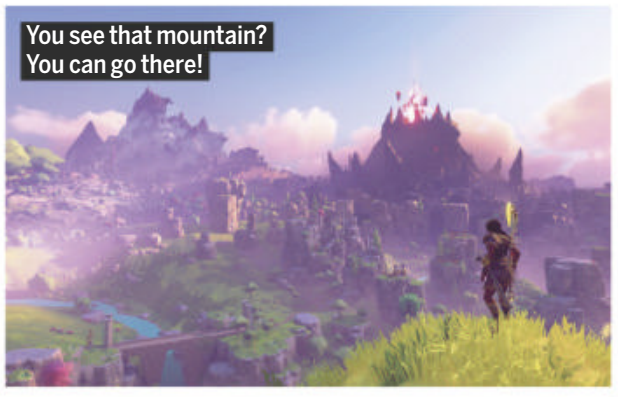

In real life, gold is much too soft to make horses out of.


Got to have a mythical tree in there somewhere.

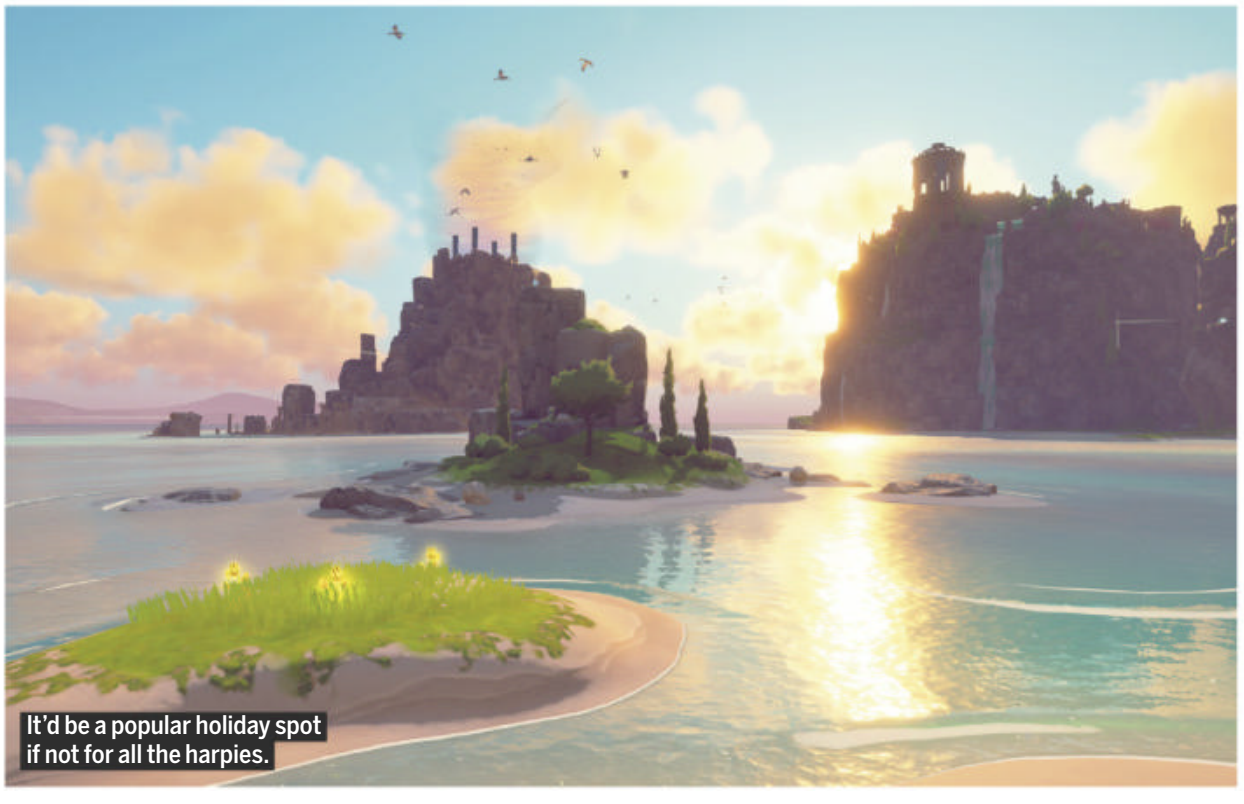
Flying looks better than it feels, unfortunately.

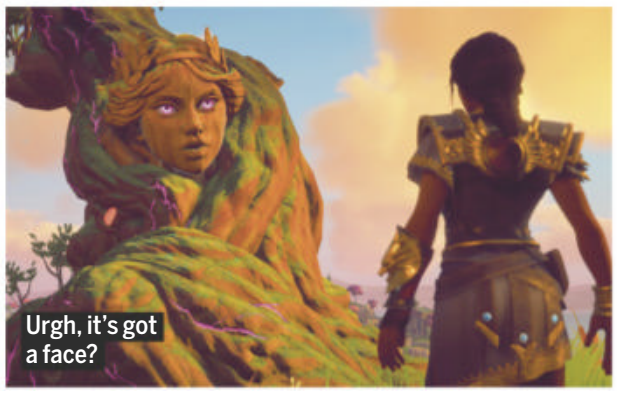

This is probably someone's fetish.


The story's charming enough, but pretty light.


You see that mountain? You can go there!

Combat kind of wears out its welcome before long.


It'd be a popular holiday spot if not for all the harpies.


Urgh, it's got a face?

» an overwhelming amount of stuff, and feels like a step backwards for Ubisoft in terms of open world design.

All of these objects serve a purpose, at least. Zeus' lightning increases your stamina, which is something worth investing in as it lets you run, glide and climb for longer. The figs, mushrooms, nectar and pomegranates can be brewed into potions that grant you handy buffs, including increasing your defence and boosting your attacks.

If you need a particular item, you can climb up somewhere high and enable farsight, a mode that lets you scan the horizon and tag things, which then appear on your map. The downside of this is that it doesn't take long for your map to become comically loaded with icons as you tag stuff, but that's always the way with Ubisoft games.

Immortals is at its best when you're pursuing the story, getting tangled up in the neuroses of the fallen gods. It's a nice touch that almost every deity and mythical figure you meet is troubled, eccentric, or just plain weird. This is a very human pantheon of gods, and the writers really have fun with them. However, many of the jokes will land harder if you have even a passing knowledge of the mythology it's based on, which does limit its appeal a little. There's actually a good variety of quests in the game, a lot of which are heavily skewed towards solving puzzles.

I was actually surprised by how much of a puzzle game *Immortals* is

I was actually surprised by how much of a puzzle game *Immortals* is. Sprinkled across the map are self-contained challenges called Vaults of Tartaros, which appear as volcanic openings in the ground and contain elaborate physics and environmental puzzles. Some of them are brilliantly designed, some are forgettable, but they hit more than they miss. Several important story moments also involve puzzles, including big, intricate dungeons at the end of each god's quest chain. Also, props to Ubisoft for the broad range of accessibility options on offer, which extends to making puzzles easier if you don't especially enjoy trying to do them.

Many of the game's puzzles involve the Bracers of Herakles, which let Fenyx grab and throw heavy objects. Dropping boxes on pressure plates is a common occurrence, as is firing arrows through braziers to set things on fire, and rolling giant balls around. The puzzles draw from a relatively shallow pool of interactions, but they combine, remix and reappropriate them in some pretty clever ways. Vaults are made up of multiple sections, linked by checkpoints, and the game is particularly good at escalating the challenge. The first puzzle will teach you the basics, culminating in a more significant test of skill at the end.

You'll do a fair amount of fighting too. Combat in *Immortals* is dramatic and fast-paced, mixing melee weapons and bows. Fenyx can perform slow, heavy attacks with a hammer, fast attacks with a sword, and switch instantly to a bow when required to pepper enemies with arrows. Dodge or block just as an enemy attacks and time will slow, leaving them open to attack. You can also unlock a bunch of special abilities, including pounding enemies with a giant hammer. It's enjoyable enough and simple to get to grips with, if ultimately pretty uninteresting. I found that I rarely looked forward to combat and much preferred working out the puzzles.

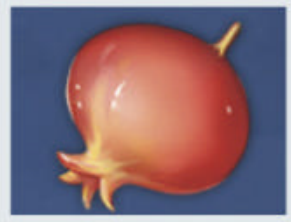
WILD AT HEART

If a lot of what you've read here sounds familiar, you've probably played *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. *Immortals* is heavily inspired by Nintendo's critically acclaimed Switch game, with an emphasis on *heavily*. But considering *BotW* will almost certainly never be released on PC, that's a good thing. The puzzles in *Immortals* aren't nearly as smart, the art isn't as refined, and the world isn't as beguiling. But it's still a strong attempt at making a game in the same vein – and probably the closest thing we have to a *Legend of Zelda* game on PC at the moment.

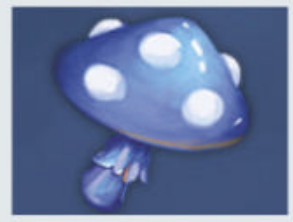
Don't be fooled by the art style, however. Despite having simpler, more stylised textures than the likes of *Watch Dogs* and *Assassin's Creed*, *Immortals* is quite demanding. There are some nice shader effects, reflections and other high-end details you might not expect from a game with this kind of vibrant cartoon aesthetic. I managed to maintain a steady 60fps at 1440p with an Intel i7-9700K and an RTX 2080 Super, but even with this setup I did experience some distracting stutter on-screen when I was looking at a really dense vista.

Immortals is easy to like. It has an infectious energy, a great sense of humour, and a world that is full of colour and life. I just wish the mechanical stuff underpinning everything was more fine-tuned. The unsatisfying, weightless character movement is a real letdown, because there's no getting away from it. This is a game where you're constantly running, flying, climbing and riding on horseback. But its unique take on Greek mythology, memorable characters, and fun, lively quests do their best to make up for it, even if it doesn't always pull it off. ■

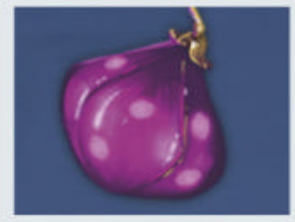
NATURE'S BOUNTY *Flora you can forage for useful buffs*



POMEGRANATE
Found growing on trees or placed in baskets as tributes to the gods, these juicy orbs will restore Fenyx's health.



BLUE MUSHROOM
Eating these glowing fungi will restore your stamina, even mid-climb. Find them in rocky areas and caves.



OLYMPIAN FIG
You'll find these near houses and temples, and turning them into a potion will give your defence a nice boost.

FLOWER NECTAR
You can also boost your attack by turning these glowing buds into potions. Usually found near rivers and by the ocean.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

This is a fun, vibrant open world game with a great sense of humour. I just wish it felt nicer to play.

72

EXCEL-LENT

FOOTBALL MANAGER 21 has learned a few new moves. ***By Phil Iwaniuk***

Since it began back in the '90s, Sports Interactive's *Football Manager* series has walked a fine line between showing you what's happening and leaving you to fill in the blanks. It's easy for those outside its gravitational pull to take the piss out of all the spreadsheets and a match engine that still can't match PS2-era *FIFA*, but they're missing the point. *FM*'s trick is in getting you to believe so deeply in its world that your imagination pours into all the cracks.

So when *Football Manager 2021* comes along and brings with it a newly detail-rich match engine and sports data analysis figures that quash any ambiguity about your tactics, the seasoned manager is faced with a bit of a culture shock. You're no longer imagining the exact shimmy by which Jaden Sancho found the space to ping in the Champions League final-winning cross, you're seeing it verbatim. It isn't quite 'Dylan goes electric', but it is a landmark moment in the series.

And, in case there's any ambiguity, a positive one at that. Because although there was a lot of charm in *FM*'s ethereal nature when it came to which tactics worked and which didn't, there was a lot of frustration too. There's nowhere for inefficient or nonsensical tactical systems to hide now. You can see where they break down, via an initially befuddling array of heatmaps and graphs which show the areas your players are covering, where passes are going astray, why you're not getting crosses in, and, in those rarest moments, why you're belting everyone who visits your home turf.

And because you're given newfound power to discover the inner workings of formations and tactics, it's no longer enough to just sign all of the best players, send them out onto the pitch and expect them to trot back to the dressing room with three points.

FM21 makes this path towards tactical enlightenment a bit easier on you via some UI tweaks and a more involved tutorial phase. Upon taking over a new club, you're invited to build a tactical approach from scratch. This starts not with a formation, but a philosophy. Each approach requires different talents from your squad beyond their positions, relating to specific roles – if your full-backs are the stay at home types, you'd be unwise to build a tactic based around them sprinting up and down the pitch, overlapping wingers and getting involved in attacks.

Agents can now be approached directly to strike up transfer talks

Your backroom staff makes a few suggestions as to which approaches and formations best suit your current squad, but as ever you're free (and often wise) to disagree with them completely. After all, perhaps you've plans to bring in some fresh talent to enforce a new system altogether.

And when you do, another of *FM21*'s significant changes rears its head. Agents can now be approached directly to strike up transfer talks, giving you a quick assessment of a potential transfer, letting you know if there's any interest from the player and what their salary demands might be. There's no point nickle-and-diming a transfer fee with the manager if your target has no intention of moving, after all.

GESTURES WILDLY

It's not just agent relationships that count, of course. As odd as it sounds, this year's update lets you add gestures to your interactions. So if you're really angry with your prima donnas in the dressing room, you can literally kick a water bottle now to get your point across.

These are all welcome features, and they contribute to a greater level of depth in a series you'd need James Cameron and his mini-sub to chart the depths of. But what they also contribute to is the scourge of the *Football Manager* career: wading through treacle syndrome. Getting through a calendar week used to take about four clicks in the *Championship Manager* days: now it'll take you through a national lockdown.

And yet the urge to get to the next match is as imperative as ever. Perhaps *more* than ever, actually, thanks to that revised match engine. You can see the difference in quality between League Two football and a top flight match, and between the weakest and strongest players on the pitch, like never before.

For another year, then, Sports Interactive somehow makes a compelling case to go back to the franchise you probably spent 500 hours on last year. The differences might look pretty subtle to an outsider, but they change your decision-making on a profound level. The winning streak continues. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A football management sim with a database used by actual football managers

DEVELOPER
Sports Interactive

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
i7 9700K, RTX 2080 Ti, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3I7IF76

WHAT NOT TO WEAR

Lower league football's most obnoxious kits

FOREST GREEN ROVERS
Is it an attempt at camouflage? I wouldn't want to be seen in it either.

PLYMOUTH ARGYLE
Look, there's more to Plymouth than Ginsters... Oh, I see. No there isn't.

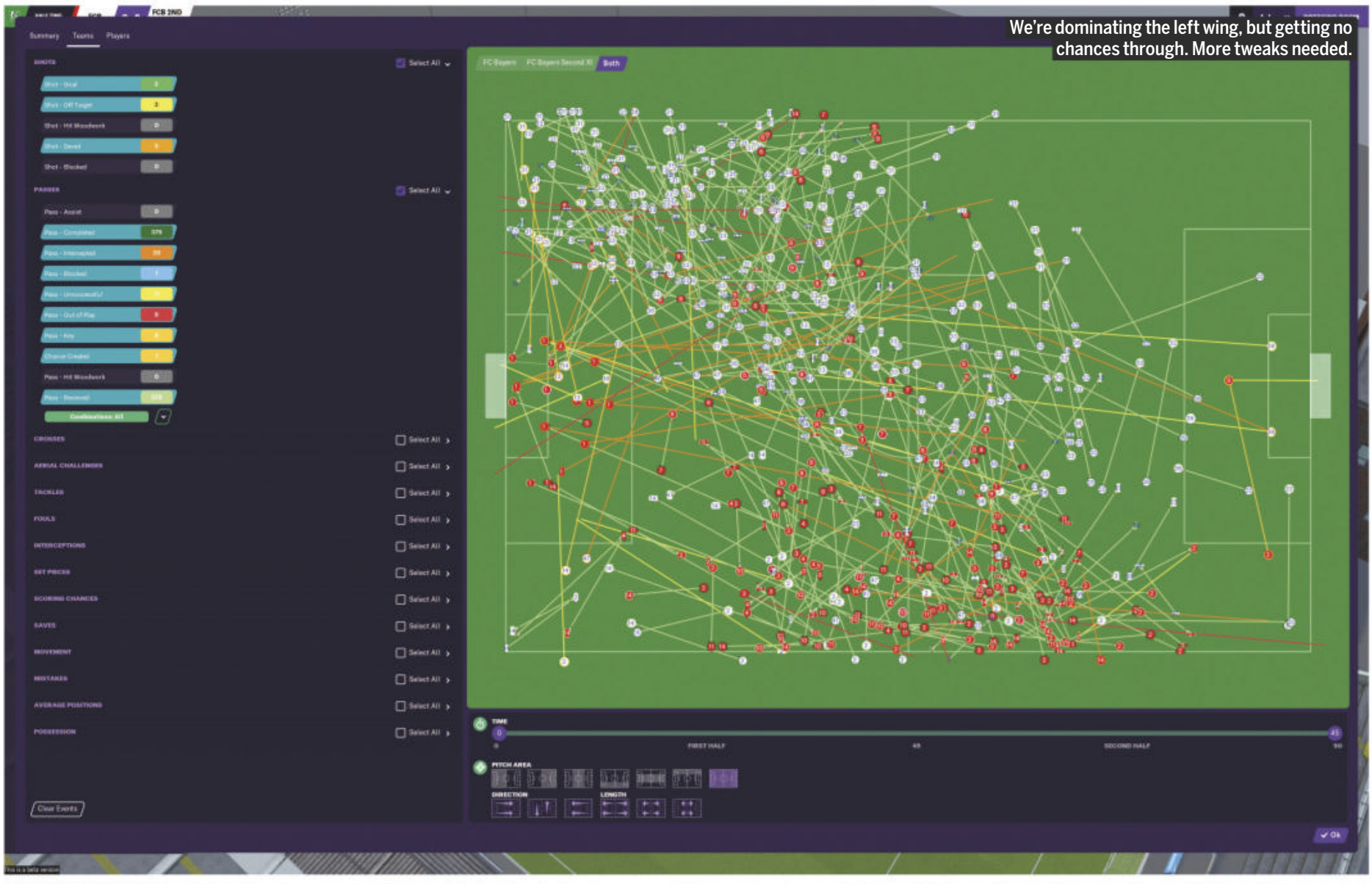
ALTRINGHAM
J. Davidson Scrap Metal. Those four lovely words every player dreams of wearing.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

With a newfound litheness on the pitch and deep data analysis, *FM21* gives you an easy excuse to relapse.

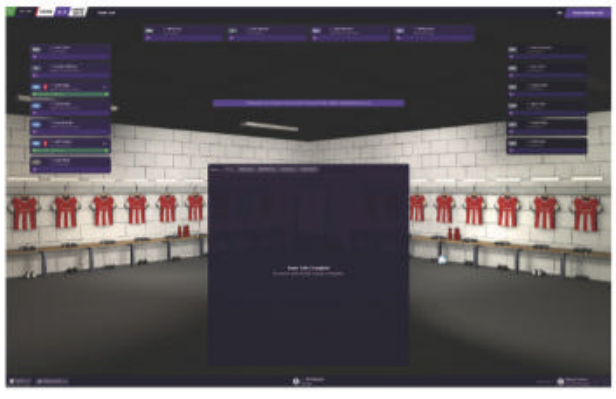
85

It looks so much more like football this year that there's a newfound excitement to chances.



We're dominating the left wing, but getting no chances through. More tweaks needed.

Exeter City starting XI vs reserves probably wouldn't have filled the stands anyway.



Just look at all those data points. It's like a card from the world's hardest game of bingo.

BARK LIFE

PHOGS! proves that crimes against God can be adorable. ***By Luke Kemp***

Would you classify this game's protagonists as 'cute', or 'a horrific monstrosity'? I think I'll go with 'both'. It's still fashionable to put in a claim of cognitive dissonance, after all. I'm not ashamed to say (perhaps I should be) that, when I first saw this double-headed... thing, the question that immediately sprang to mind was 'how does it poo?'. This is not, sadly, something the game ever addresses.

The phogs have two heads, no legs, the ability to stretch like that toffee you can never seem to find any more, and – most importantly of all – a variety of hats to unlock. Each level has golden bones to find, and these are used as currency in the hat shops. The hats don't grant any special abilities, however, unless you count the ability to make your freakish pup faces look even cuter.

Levels are split across three worlds based on phoggy concepts: food, play and sleep. Each world contains six platform-puzzletastic stages, and, well... not a boss *fight*, but a boss *experience*. The Play area is easily the highlight of *PHOGS!*. Bouncing around slightly awkwardly in a pinball machine, working in tandem to play a motorbike arcade game, playing giant hook-a-duck... it's great fun whether playing alone or in co-op.

When playing solo – and I'm going to assume the use of a gamepad, which is definitely the best way to play – each phog is controlled individually. The left side of the pad controls movement, stretching, and grabbing (and barking!) for one, the right side for the other. Can't cross that gap? No problem, bite onto these conveniently placed pegs, and swing from one to the other until you're over the other side. Need to water that plant? Get one phog to bite onto a nearby water pipe, and let the other one vomit the water out where you need it. Best not to dwell on the mechanics of that one.

Solo or co-op, I never ran into anything that stumped me for long

Solo or co-op, I never ran into anything that stumped me for long. I'm all for games that refuse to spite the player, and I consistently enjoyed my time with the adorable affronts to nature; but generally speaking, the game offers an enjoyable plateau rather than an experience with regular highlights. That's not necessarily a bad thing. More of an issue is the fact that online play opens the game up to bugs, glitches and disconnections.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Two phogs, one pup

DEVELOPER
Bit Loom Games

PUBLISHER
Coatsink

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
playphogs.com

THIS TASTES CUTE

Despite the fact that I never played a whole level without issues online, things never stopped being fun. This is in no small part thanks to the presentation. The wonderful art design is equal parts cute and fascinating. It gives the already memorable and varied tasks a strong, utterly delightful flavour.

Things going wrong are just as enjoyable as things going right, and twice as likely to spark a giggle. Mistiming a swing or a jump on my own is a minor inconvenience that I'm happy to bounce back from. Doing the same with a friend tends to result in half-pained laughter, and unspoken (or spoken) blame. That was *your* phog that messed up, right? Trying to operate a comically large pair of scissors, though, definitely errs more towards frustration.

With the three main worlds completed, one final gauntlet of tasks remains. I won't go into detail, as there are some great moments that are best experienced fresh, but it feels just a *little* dry and disappointing compared to what has come before. Whether or not you'll go back is entirely dependent on your urge to mop up missed collectibles. And your love for decorating physically impossible mutant dogs.

If you're looking for a sweeter antidote to the endless parade of grimdark RPGs and games dedicated to killing, then this is a certainly great choice. It's all about friendliness and joy. Great alone or a guaranteed source of fun and teamwork with a friend, you'll be happy to see your monitor get all phoggy. ■

PHOG DAY AFTERNOON *A typical day in the life of the phogs*

1 This is a... erm... actually, I have no idea.

2 One phog is sucking water from a pipe, the other is vomiting it through the hose. Perhaps painfully.

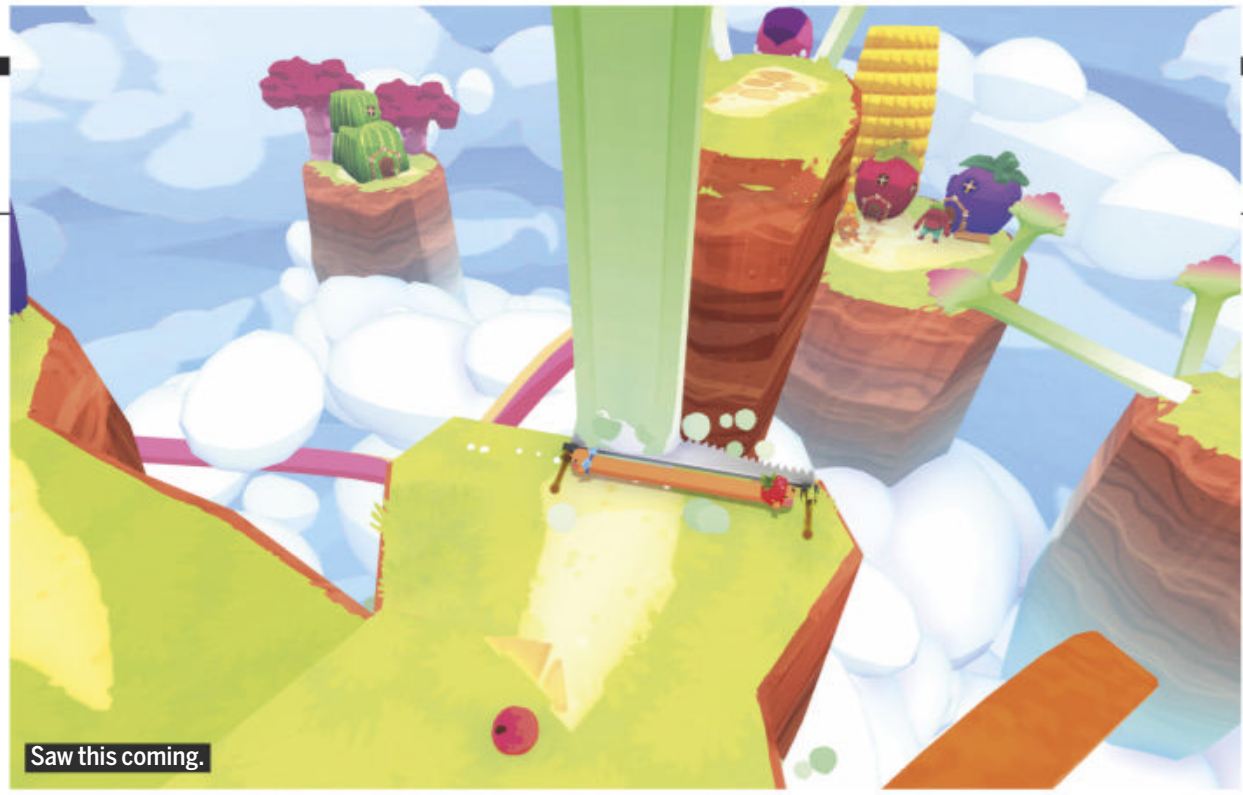
3 You'll drag these huge square watermelons around to use as bridges. Obviously.

4 You'll have fungi bouncing on these once they've grown.

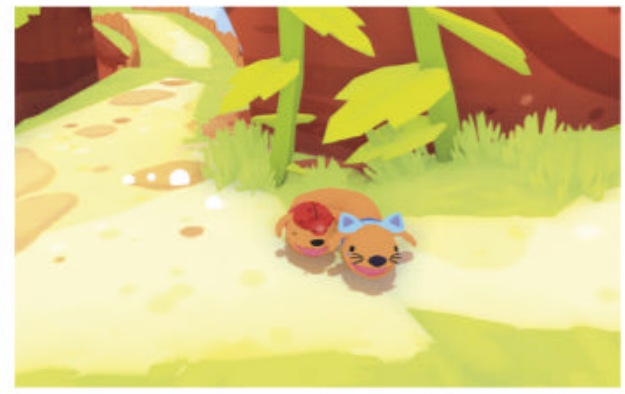
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Who's a good boy? *PHOGS!* is a good boy! Yes you are! You're a charming if slight adventure! Yes you are!

75


Saw this coming.

Uuurrgghh, this was painful.



There's no dance-off, sadly.

WE WILL BE YOUR DOOM!!

Is... is that octopus cooking himself?

Intro

Tech

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMING HARDWARE.

PC PowerPlay POWER AWARD

Our Power Award is given to products that are best in class no matter your budget.

PC PowerPlay SMART BUY

Our Smart Buy Award goes to products that balance performance with price tag.

GEAR THIS ISSUE

079 THRUSTMASTER TCA SIDESTICK AIRBUS
080 GPU GROUP TEST
086 SSD GROUP TEST

THE PCPP TESTBENCH

CPU INTEL I7 7700K INTEL.COM.AU
MOBO ASUS Z270 ROG CROSSHAIR VI HERO ASUS.COM.AU
RAM 2 X BALLISTIX 8GB DDR4-3200 CRUCIAL.COM
PSU CORSAIR 850W PSU CORSAIR.COM
COOLING H105 CORSAIR COOLER WWW.CORSAIR.COM.AU

FLIGHTSTICK

Thrustmaster TCA Sidestick Airbus Edition

A flight stick made for Microsoft Flight Simulator.

PRICE From $119 **ONLINE** www.thrustmaster.com

The Thrustmaster TCA Sidestick Airbus Edition is a flight stick made in the image of an Airbus sidestick. It's an officially licensed tie-in. And as well as the base controller you can get a throttle set and a pack of additional modules that add a real sense of authenticity to sims like Microsoft Flight Simulator 2020.

Good news on that front: the Thrustmaster TCA Sidestick Airbus Edition is "plug and play" ready for Microsoft Flight Simulator 2020. You won't need to spend an hour or five configuring its button layout.

These are plastic flight sticks, made to last but not with the weight and construction quality of a Thrustmaster Warthog. But at a third of the price, what else do you expect?

Give yourself a minute to get over the relatively light all-plastic build and let the quality of the stick itself take over. The Thrustmaster TCA Sidestick Airbus Edition is an incredibly smooth, dead zone free flight stick that offers sim-grade control to compete with any mainstream joystick at any price.

There are no rubberized parts to the stick's grip, no metal panels anywhere. Of course, this is the norm for a flight stick at this level. And we have no reason to believe it won't last for years, even if you do end up throwing the Thrustmaster TCA Sidestick Airbus Edition at a wall a couple of times after messing up a landing five times in a row.

Thrustmaster also proves these buttons haven't just been stuck on here without much thought. The two primary non-trigger buttons on the stick's top can be swapped around. Each comes on its own little plastic module. You can unscrew them, and there are mirror image replacements in the box. When fastened in, there's zero wobble, no sign these are switchable.

Add the Quadrant throttle if you want even more of an Airbus flavour. The quality and specificity of the controls on these outboard modules blow away those on the flight stick's base.

Using the TCA Quadrant Airbus Edition is likely why we have a slightly dim view of the stick's own buttons. These feel much better and have a real sense of the tactile immersion that is the primary reason to buy a dedicated controller like this.

Sure, the TCA Quadrant Airbus Edition is still made of plastic and the throttles don't have as much resistance as the real thing. But there are light clicks of feedback as you reach each milestone on the throttle, and a great release catch behind each throttle lever that lets you put the engines into reverse thrust.

ANDREW WILLIAMS

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

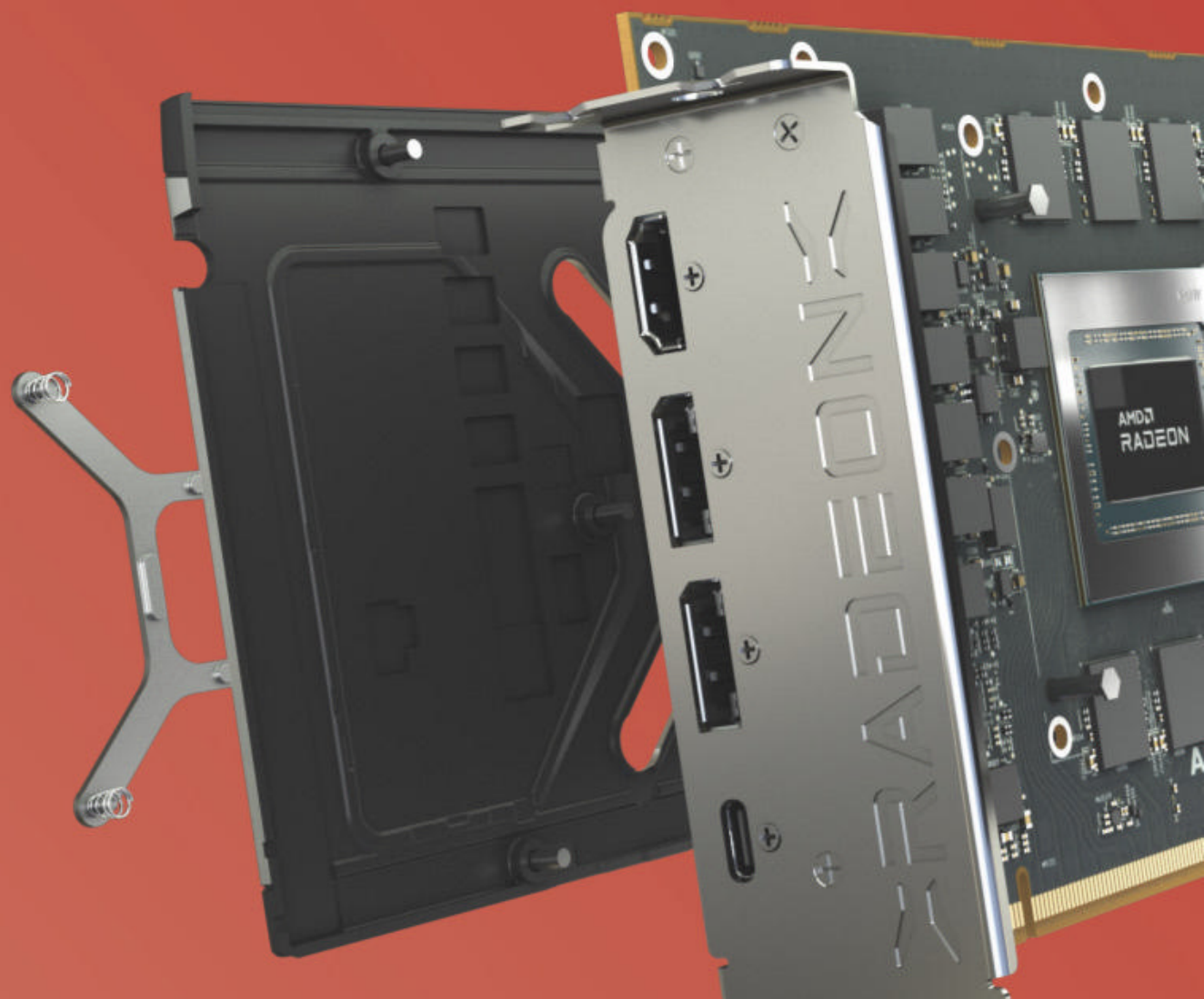
The Thrustmaster TCA Sidestick Airbus Edition is the perfect fit for Microsoft Flight Simulator. It's a good quality, reasonably priced flight stick based on real-world Airbus hardware.

80

GROUP TEST

GRAPHICS CARDS

Out with the old and in with the new. *By Jacob Ridley*



With the arrival of AMD's RX 6000-series, we now know exactly how the high-end of graphics cards looks for this GPU generation. At the pinnacle of performance, you've got Nvidia's RTX 3090 sparring off with the RX 6900 XT. That's a fierce match, but the Nvidia card ends up taking the win.

Performance doesn't come cheap – the RTX 3090 will set you back $3,000, somehow making the £950 RX 6900 XT look cheap. Well, definitely cheaper. As ever it's the more affordable cards that have the biggest impact on PC gaming as whole. Or they would, if it were possible to find any of them in stock.

It's important to know exactly what you're after before attempting any risque back alley purchases. And that's where I come in, PC Gamer's resident graphics card fixer.

AN ENTHUSIAST CARD FOR ANY PC GAMER WITH 4K IN THEIR SIGHTS

GeForce RTX 3080

90

NVIDIA **$1,699**

The graphics card to beat

1 The RTX 3080 houses a monster of a GPU in the 8nm GA102. With 8,704 CUDA cores, 68 RT cores, and 272 Tensor cores, it breezes past the Turing generation and makes ray tracing look easy. It's an ultra enthusiast card, and as such it often makes the RTX 3090 and RX 6900 XT look a little silly.

It's hardly a cheap graphics, card though, starting out at $1,099, but it swiftly despatches both the RTX 3090 and RX 6900 XT in terms of performance per penny. It's also more than a match for AMD's RX 6800 XT, which is a little cheaper. On top of that you've got the best of the RTX feature set that Nvidia has been building brick-by-brick over the past few years. Reflex, ray tracing, DLSS and Broadcast all sweeten the deal for our favourite graphics card today.

The RTX 3080 sets the standard for ray tracing performance. While the 'holy grail' of rendering is still a detriment to overall framerates, the RTX 3080 makes swift work of it, especially with Nvidia's AI supersampling, DLSS, turned on.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Incredible gen-on-gen FPS boost
- Makes 2080 Ti look mid-range
- Ray tracing isn't a sacrifice

SPECS **CUDA CORES:** 8,704 / **BOOST CLOCK:** 1,710MHZ / **MEMORY:** 10GB GDDR6X / **MEMORY BUS:** 320-BIT / **MEMORY BANDWIDTH:** 760GB/S / **TGP:** 320W

Radeon RX 6800 XT

90

AMD **$1,449**

RDNA 2 at its best

2 There are few finer alternatives to Nvidia than the RX 6800 XT. A highly competitive card that comes so close to its rival, with a nominal performance differential to the RTX 3080, it is truly an enthusiast card worth consideration for any PC gamer with 4K in their sights.

It's a tough call between it and the RTX 3080, but the latter just pips AMD to the post with the final touches à la RTX. The RX 6800 XT delivers high 4K performance and a hefty VRAM increase over the RTX 3080 while also being cheaper. However, it's easy to argue that an extra $200 dropped on the RTX 3080 is a small price to pay for greater 4K performance, much improved ray tracing, and DLSS. All available today and with two years' worth of developer support in the bank.

Yet we're still big fans of what AMD has managed to accomplish with the RX 6800 XT, a return to form that injects some much needed competition into the GPU market and offers a worthy red team alternative for any high-end gaming PC build.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- 4K excellence
- Cheaper than an RTX 3080
- Mediocre ray tracing performance

SPECS **CUDA CORES:** 4,608 / **BOOST CLOCK:** 2,250MHZ / **MEMORY:** 16GB GDDR6 / **MEMORY BUS:** 256-BIT / **MEMORY BANDWIDTH:** 512GB/S / **TGP:** 300W

3

A 4K-CAPABLE GRAPHICS CARD WHICH DOESN'T REQUIRE TOO MUCH FIDDLING

GeForce RTX 3070

90

NVIDIA **$1,249**

4K on a slightly slimmer budget

3 Perhaps the only high-end Ampere that's anything close to reasonably affordable, the RTX 3070 is also impressive for its ability to match the Turing graphics card, the RTX 2080 Ti, for less than half of its price tag.

At $1,249 it's still a significant sum – we're talking next-gen console equivalent pricing here – but it's hardly exorbitant when compared to PC gaming's top graphics silicon today. In return, you're gifted a 4K-capable graphics card which doesn't require too much fiddling to reach playable, if not high, framerates. And it'll absolutely smash it at 1440p, no question about that.

Its gaming performance credentials are undoubtedly impressive, but what makes the RTX 3070 our pick for the sensible PC gaming connoisseur is the entire Nvidia ecosystem underlying the RTX stack today. DLSS is a neat trick for improving performance, with only a nominal loss in clarity, and other features such as Broadcast and Reflex go a long way to sweetening the deal.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- On par with the RTX 2080 Ti
- Second-gen RT cores
- Less power hungry than others

SPECS CUDA CORES: 5,888 / **BOOST CLOCK:** 1,725MHZ / **MEMORY:** 8GB GDDR6 / **MEMORY BUS:** 8GB GDDR6 / **MEMORY BANDWIDTH:** 448GB/S / **TGP:** 220W

GeForce RTX 3060 Ti

90

NVIDIA **$769**

More affordable Ampere

4 The cheapest Ampere to date, the RTX 3060 Ti is a close relation to the RTX 3070. While both utilise the same GA104 GPU, the RTX 3060 Ti has fewer SMs enabled. Memory capacity and capability remain the same at 8GB GDDR6 across a 256-bit bus.

While 17% less capable in core count, the RTX 3060 Ti makes up for it with some judicious GPU Boost frequencies. That partially explains why the RTX 3060 Ti can be within 17% to just single digits off the pace of the RTX 3070, despite operating at a silicon disadvantage. Not bad for a sub-$800 card.

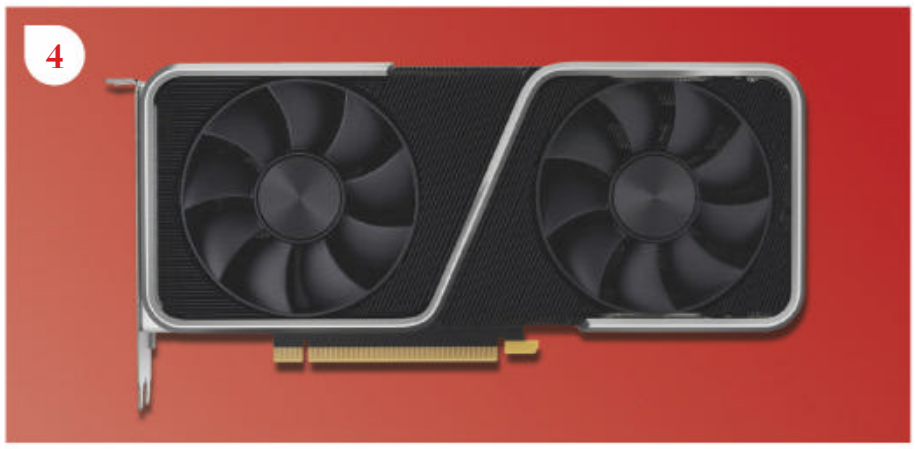
If you haven't already done the maths, the RTX 3060 Ti is 20% cheaper than the RTX 3070, and so performance per dollar is on the up with the diminutive graphics card. That's why we love it so; it's a great GPU for the full stack of resolutions, and has decent ray tracing capability to boot, courtesy of its second-generation RT cores.

If the RTX 3080 or RTX 3070 seem out of reach, the RTX 3060 Ti makes for a decent stand-in.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- A little more affordable
- 2080 Super performance
- Under $800

SPECS CUDA CORES: 4,864 / **BOOST CLOCK:** 1,665MHZ / **MEMORY:** 8GB GDDR6 / **MEMORY BUS:** 256-BIT / **MEMORY BANDWIDTH:** 448GB/S / **TGP:** 200W



4K PERFORMANCE

Back with the introduction of the GTX 1080 Ti, gaming at over 60Hz frame rates while at a 4K resolution has been a possibility with Nvidia's high-end kit. But the bar has been lowering ever since, with even the RTX 2070 being able to offer something close to high-fidelity 4K gaming last generation. With the introduction of the RTX 30-series, we're looking at 4K performance right the way down to the RTX 3060 Ti.

Not only is it cheaper than ever to buy a 4K-capable graphics card, it's possible to pick up a decent 4K gaming monitor for less. The entire ecosystem for high-fidelity gaming is getting cheaper by the day.

But Nvidia is only one side of the coin. AMD went from zero to hero in the high-end, and its latest RX 6000-series graphics cards are more than a match for those pesky eight million or so pixels required every frame at 4K.

Radeon RX 6900 XT

60

AMD **$1,699**

If you've money to burn

5 The RTX 3090 may have sat unchallenged at the top of graphics performance at launch, but we knew it wouldn't be long until AMD rustled together a challenger. The RX 6900 XT hopes to knock Ampere's finest from its perch on high and send it spiralling back down to Earth. And it gets kind of close, too, with 4K performance a little off the pace of the RTX 3090 – and all for one third off the asking price.

For that reason, it's simply the better buy for any PC gamer without any ulterior motives of the pro creator variety. But there's a reason it's not number one in our graphics card guide today, and that's simply due to the fact it's not that much better than an RTX 3080, and sometimes not at all.

But the RX 6900 XT does come with assurances that the RTX 3080 can't make, such as its 16GB of GDDR6 memory, which is a whole 6GB greater than the 10GB of (faster) GDDR6X memory on the green team card. The RX 6900 XT is a cheaper alternative to the RTX 3090.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Close to RTX 3090 performance
- → But cheaper!
- → Middling ray tracing capabilities

SPECS CUDA CORES: 5,120 / **BOOST CLOCK:** 2,250MHZ / **MEMORY:** 16GB GDDR6 / **MEMORY BUS:** 256-BIT / **MEMORY BANDWIDTH:** 512GB/S / **TGP:** 300W

GeForce RTX 3090

80

NVIDIA **$2,999**

Pro-creators only

6 This colossal graphics card is powerful, but far more fitting of Titan credentials than GeForce ones. It's not built with your average gamer in mind, instead it's targeting creative professionals and compute intensive application acceleration, and that's why it doesn't come with your average price tag, either.

As immense in price tag as it is in stature, the question on everyone's lips is whether it's worth it. For gamers, no. It's not much quicker than the RTX 3080. But for pro-creators, for whom time is money, and where lower render time has a direct correlation with how much they can earn, the RTX 3090 comes into its own.

It's for that reason that we've placed this card last on our list, but since we know PC gamers will undoubtedly spend ungodly quantities of cash just in order to save face and ensure bragging rights, it's still worth a mention. After all, it *is* the most powerful gaming graphics card on the planet right now, whether it's a great deal or not.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Confidently top of the charts
- → Massive memory buffer
- → Huge and expensive

SPECS CUDA CORES: 10,496 / **BOOST CLOCK:** 1,695MHZ / **MEMORY:** 24GB GDDR6X / **MEMORY BUS:** 384-BIT / **MEMORY BANDWIDTH:** 936GB/S / **TGP:** 350W

AMD RADEON RX 6800

ASUS & AMD

SUPERCHARGE YOUR GAMES WHILE KEEPING COOL

During the hottest days of summer, there's nothing better than closing the shades, cranking the air conditioner, and spending a day getting lost in another world through your gaming PC. Of course, no air conditioner is strong enough to keep your PC cool as it's pumping out cutting-edge graphics, and an overheating PC can spell disaster. That's why ASUS has prioritised cooling alongside power in its latest range of graphics cards across the Strix and TUF lines.

All three of the cards here feature 16GB GDDR6 memory, HDMI 2.1 ports, GPU Tweak II for improved performance tweaking, and DisplayPort 1.4a. They also benefit from PCIe 4.0, the latest iteration of the PCIe interface used for the connection of add-on cards and drives within your PC. This doubles the throughput compared to a PCIe 3.0 card.

OVERPOWER

The ROG Strix Radeon RX 6800 OC Edition 16GB GDDR is an extremely powerful card with looks to match. It cuts a striking figure with its all aluminium shroud, complete with a durable metal backplate and reinforced frame, but even more impressive is the power it packs. This card is capable of pumping out incredible 4K visuals at an ultra-high frame rate, and it supports DirectX ray tracing (DXR) in compatible games. This means that you'll be able to run some of the latest and greatest games at very high or max settings, with variable rate shading (VRS) and built-in AMD FidelityFX features letting you experience these games with extreme fidelity. This card has some nifty tricks up its sleeve, including Contrast Adaptive Sharpening, which gives you the option of upscaling titles that might have lost some details after applying temporal anti-aliasing. It's perfect for VR, too, thanks to AMD's anti-lag and Radeon Boost technologies.

ROG-STRIX-RX6800-O16G-GAMING

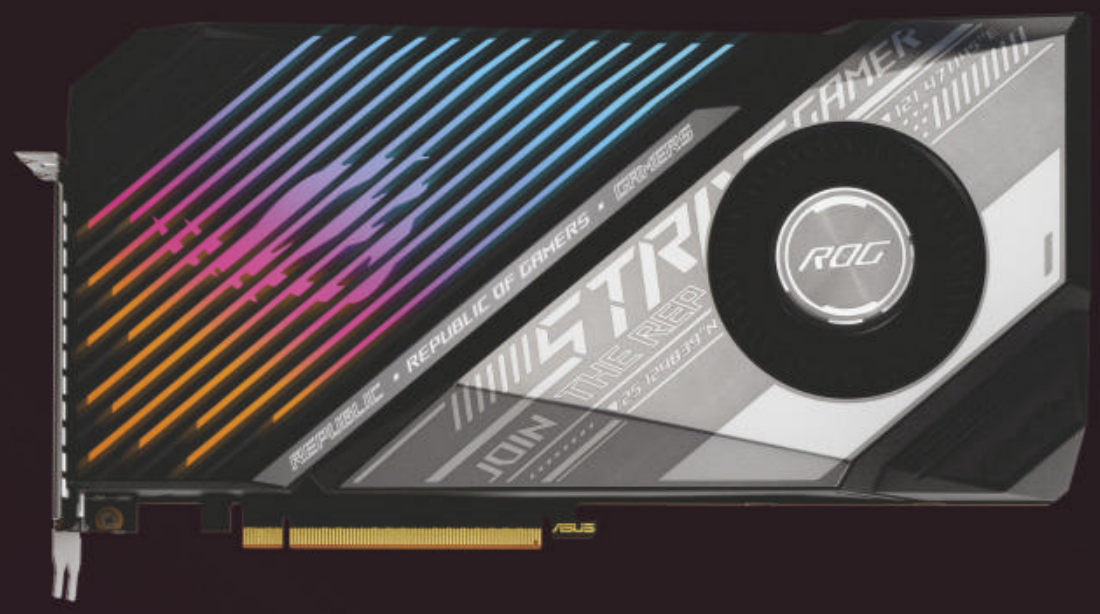
ROG-STRIX-RX6800XT-O16G-GAMING

This card features three fans, each with an increased blade count compared to previous releases: 13 on the centre fan, and 11 on each of the auxiliary fans. They've been designed to allow maximum airflow, pushing air

AMD RADEON RX 6800

directly onto the GPU heat spreader to keep the card cool. The new rotation scheme means that the middle fan rotates in the opposite direction to the others, providing increased cooling coverage, as well as vented back plates for better airflow pass-through. These fans will start spinning when the GPU hits 60 degrees Celsius, and then shut off again once it's below 55, which reduces noise and energy output.
This card is built to last, making use of ASUS' Super Alloy Power II technology. It features premium alloy chokes, solid polymer capacitors, and an array of high-current power stages, so you don't need to worry about how hard you're pushing it.

If you want to liquid cool your Strix card, you'll want the ROG Strix LC Radeon™ RX 6800 XT OC edition 16GB GDDR. The LC version features the same raw power and extraordinary feature list as the previous Strix, including all the build quality improvements introduced for this card generation, but it's built for liquid cooling. This card has a full-coverage cold plate and onboard cooling solution, letting you lower its temperature dramatically with a liquid solution.



LIGHT ME UP

All three of these models are compatible with ASUS Aura Sync, too. This means that your new graphics card will be able to glow, pulse, and change colour alongside the rest of your ASUS parts, turning your PC into a self-contained lightshow. These cards feature fully programmable lights, with multiple different effects and a wide spectrum of colours to work with.

ASUS' latest Strix and TUF cards will prepare you not just for the biggest and best games on the market today, but for the next few years of big games – and you can expect your card to last, no matter how much you push it. Whether you're after a fan-cooled card or your build is based around liquid cooling, ASUS has you covered. These cards can seriously boost your PC's performance while keeping cool and looking good.

TOUGHER THAN TUF

Looking to ASUS' TUF line of cards, the ASUS TUF GAMING Radeon RX 6800 OC edition 16GB GDDR6 is another powerful and brilliant card with incredible fan cooling and some amazing tech. Like the Strix cards, the latest TUF cards are capable of outputting stunning 4K graphics with DXR ray tracing enabled, meaning that you'll be able to wring some amazing reflections and lighting out of games like Control, Minecraft, and Cyberpunk 2077. This card uses low-latency technology like AMD Radeon Anti-Lag and Boost to power up your gaming experience, as well as Combined Adaptive Compute Ambient Occlusion for glorious lighting and variable rate shadin.

The TUF line is known for its strong components, and this card is no exception. It features a glorious metal exterior casing, with three axial-tech fans and a thick heatsink to keep it cool under pressure, offering many of the same features as the Strix card. The TUF sets itself apart with its military-grade components, soldered onto the PCB. Each card has been put through a 144-hour validation trial to prove its might under pressure, and a metal shell and armoured underside - complete with a wide vent – make for a card that looks, feels, and absolutely is powerful.

"The ROG Strix Radeon RX 6800 OC Edition 16GB GDDR is an extremely powerful card with looks to match. It cuts a striking figure with its shroud, complete with a durable metal backplate and reinforced frame, but even more impressive is the power it packs. "

GROUP TEST

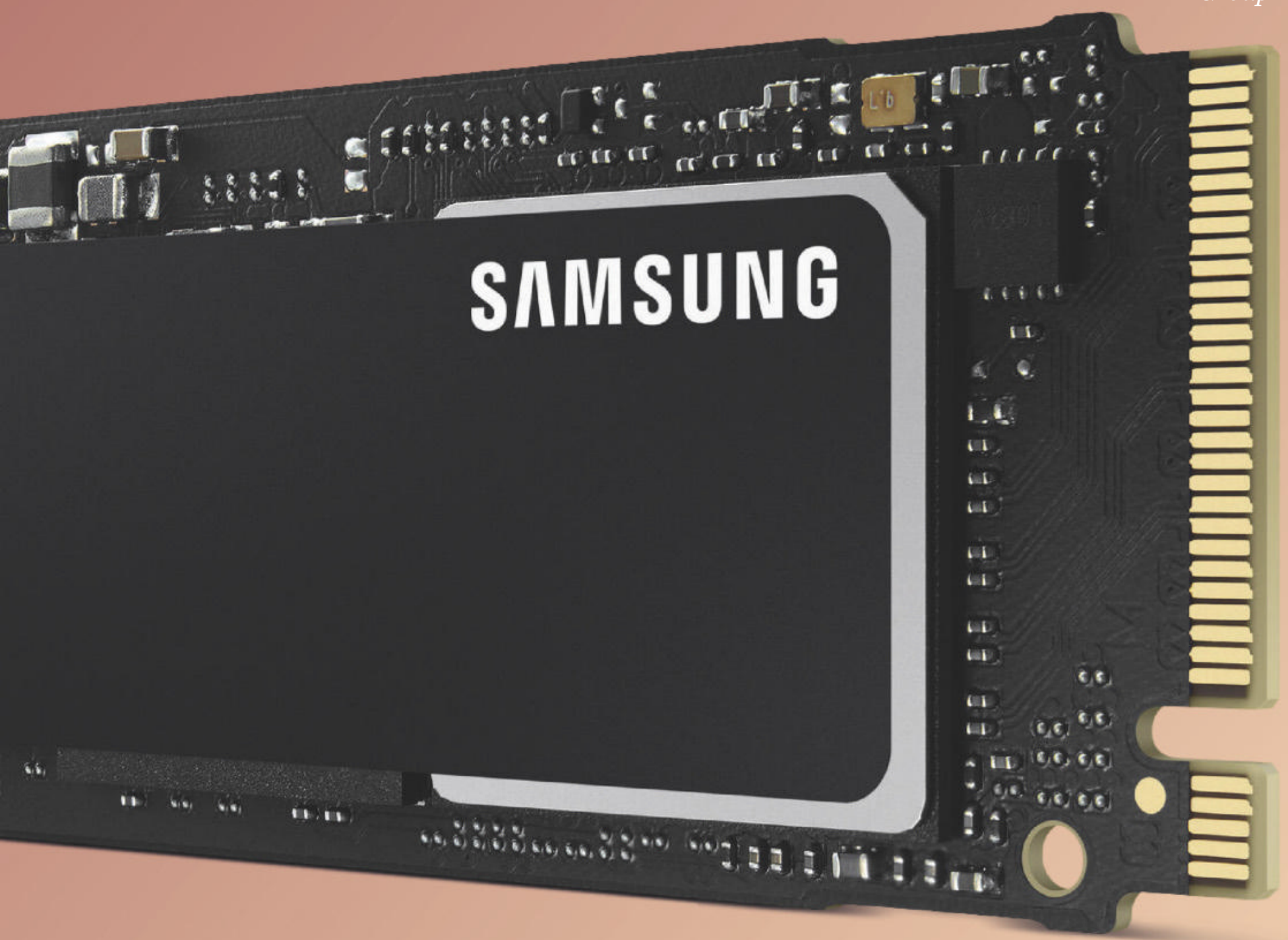
PCIe 4.0 SSDs

Next-gen storage is key to the future of gaming, and here are your best options right now. *By Alan Dexter*

One of the easiest ways of giving your system a performance boost is to upgrade your storage. This is particularly true if you're still rocking a spinning hard drive or two, although SATA SSDs will also see a notable speed boost when you upgrade to the latest drives. Right now, the best storage around uses the PCIe 4.0 interface to produce blistering read and write speeds.

At the moment only AMD's Zen 2 and Zen 3 platforms natively support PCIe 4.0 drives, although Intel's next generation of CPUs (codenamed Rocket Lake) will also jump aboard this particular super speedy wagon. So even if you don't have a supporting platform right now, you will do when you next upgrade, which is why we think that moving over to a PCIe 4.0 supporting SSD is the best way of protecting your storage investment.

2



1

980 Pro 500GB

90

SAMSUNG **$229**

The fastest next-gen SSD money can buy

Samsung has been the go-to name for SSD storage for years, and while a long time coming, the 980 Pro with its next-gen Elpis controller has been well worth the wait. If you're looking for the best headline performance right now, then nothing else can really challenge it. With sequential read and write speeds hitting 6,900MB/s and 5,000MB/s, incredible 800K IOPS for random performance, and the awesome Magician software making managing the drive a breeze. The 980 Pro is the performance junkie's drive of choice.

The only problem is the price, particularly on this 500GB model. The 1TB drive for $375 is slightly better value on a per gigabyte angle, although even here there are better deals to be had for almost the same performance. Real world performance is that much better than some of the other drives here either, so you're going to need that extreme throughput.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Awesome sequential throughput
- Strong random access
- Samsung Magician

SPECS CAPACITY: 500GB / **CONTROLLER:** SAMSUNG ELPIS / **MEMORY:** SAMSUNG 3-BIT MLC / **INTERFACE:** M.2 PCIE 4.0 X4 / **SEQ. READ:** 6,900MB/S / **SEQ. WRITE:** 5,000MB/S

2

Rocket 2TB Gen4

90

SABRENT **$469**

The best budget next-gen SSD

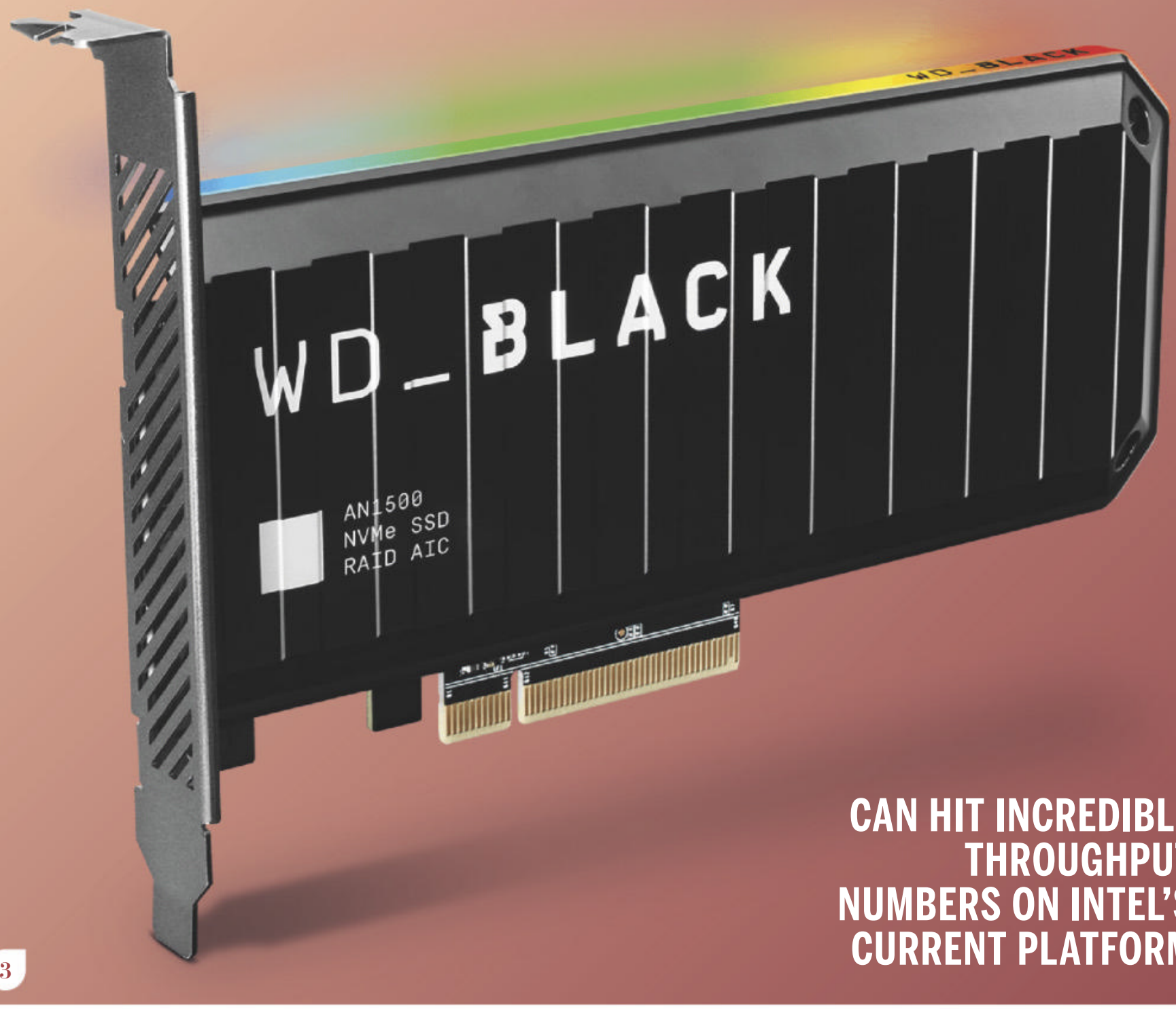
Like a lot of the drives here the Sabrent Rocket Gen4 SSD uses the Phison E16 controller, which is a decent PCIe 4.0 controller, although it does lag behind the more recent Samsung Elpis controller that can be found in the 980 Pro. That means the peak sequential figures are slightly off the pace, and the randoms are a bit slower as well, although in real terms there's hardly anything between them. In fact in terms of file copying, this Sabrent drive was moderately quicker. When it comes to game loads, there's less than a second between the fastest and slowest as well. They're all pretty fast basically.

There's a real price war going on with these next-gen drives and price fluctuations are common. Sabrent seems to stay out in front though, and given the overall package it's this drive that gets the nod from us.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Strong performance and capacity
- The best value for money
- Good software suite

SPECS CAPACITY: 2TB / **CONTROLLER:** PHISON PS5016-E16 / **MEMORY:** TOSHIBA 3D TLC / **INTERFACE:** M.2 PCIE 4.0 X4 / **SEQ. READ:** 5,000MB/S / **SEQ. WRITE:** 4,400MB/S



CAN HIT INCREDIBLE THROUGHPUT NUMBERS ON INTEL'S CURRENT PLATFORM

3

Black AN1500 2TB

80

WESTERN DIGITAL **$789**

Next-gen performance for PCIe 3.0 motherboards

3 Apart from looking completely different to the rest of the drives in this group test, this Western Digital drive is actually a bit of a cheat entry because it isn't actually a PCIe 4.0 drive at all. No, this WD Black add-in-card is actually a PCIe 3.0 device that manages to hit next-gen levels of performance thanks to running a pair of M.2 PCIe 3.0 drives as a striped array. This means it can hit incredible throughput numbers on Intel's current platforms, or AMD's first-gen Ryzen CPUs.

Such performance will cost you of course, and in this case there's a very real hit on your wallet waiting if you want to see what 6.5GB/s reads feel like. You will need a free PCIe 3.0 x8 slot in order to hit these performance figures too, which could knock your graphics card bandwidth down to x8 throughput as well (not as big a deal as you might think), depending on your platform. Even so, this is a clever solution that could give older systems a new lease of life.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Impressively strong performance
- Decent software suite
- Great looking

SPECS CAPACITY: 2TB / **CONTROLLER:** MARVELL 88NR2241 / **MEMORY:** WD 96L TLC / **INTERFACE:** PCIE 3.0 X8 AIC / **SEQ. READ:** 6,500MB/S / **SEQ. WRITE:** 4,100MB/S

Aorus 1TB NVMe Gen4

90

GIGABYTE **$279**

A next-gen drive that adds a little old school bling

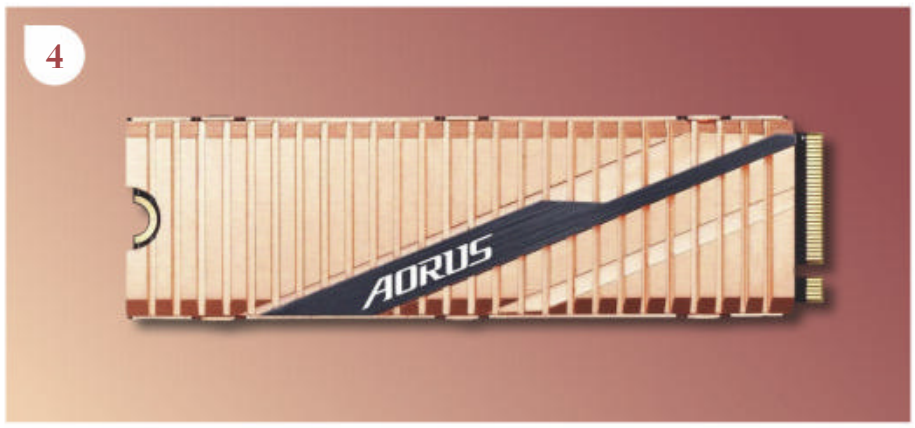
4 On release there was so little between the Corsair MP600 and this Gigabyte Aorus drive that you wouldn't be able to tell them apart even if you had a whole raft of benchmark results to look over. And that's because beneath the wildly different heatsinks, they were essentially the same drives; using the same Phison E16 controller and the same Toshiba 3D TLC NAND flash.

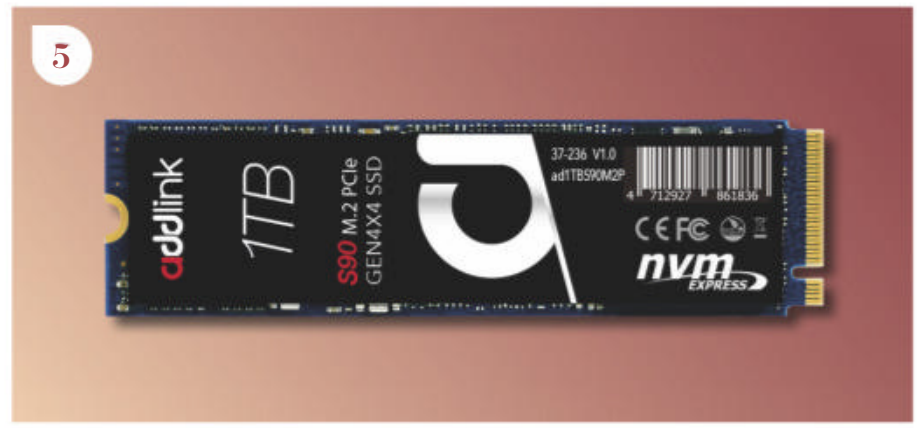
Since launch, however, Gigabyte has tweaked the firmware of the drive so that it performs slightly better, and more on a par with the likes of the Sabrent and Addlink drives. This means that we recommend it over the Corsair MP600, but honestly the difference is so slight you probably wouldn't notice in the real world. About the only thing that is different is that copper heatsink, which adds a certain retro charm to any motherboard – it also does a decent job of keeping the SSD cool. Just make sure you have room for it in your case before you buy.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Strong overall performance
- Good value for money
- Integrated heatsink

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / **CONTROLLER:** PHISON PS5016-E16 / **MEMORY:** TOSHIBA 3D TLC / **INTERFACE:** M.2 PCIE 4.0 X4 / **SEQ. READ:** 5,000MB/S / **SEQ. WRITE:** 4,400MB/S





TOMORROW'S PERFORMANCE

PCIe 4.0 SSDs are the fastest drives you can buy at 'reasonable' prices right now, offering higher sequential performance and improved random read and writes over everything we've seen before. While the performance can be incredible in benchmarks, when copying files and loading games it's fair to say that they aren't fully utilised just yet. A shift to make the most out of these next-gen SSDs that could potentially banish loading times as we know it, and make for more seamless transitions between areas.

What form this will actually take, and how it'll fit into a landscape that still has gamers running hard drives is tricky to fathom, but we wouldn't be surprised if future titles demand a certain level of SSD performance in their system requirements.

S90 2TB

90

ADDLINK **US$279**

An affordable up-to-date next-gen SSD

5 When the Addlink S90 was first released there was nothing else really out there that competed, and thus quickly became the goto next-gen drive. Since then other manufacturers have caught on to the fact that budget drives can sell in decent numbers, and so pricing has tumbled across the board. This is good for us as buyers, but it means you've got to keep on your toes. At the time of writing the Corsair, Gigabyte and 1TB Sabrent drives are all cheaper than this, and it does put the Addlink S90 in a bit of awkward spot – particularly as this is a budget drive first and foremost.

The good news is that it is a more up-to-date take on the Phison E16 controller that can be found elsewhere, meaning it offers ever so slightly better performance than the Corsair and Gigabyte drives. So while they're slightly cheaper, this has a slight edge in terms of peak throughput, and that's a price we think is worth coughing up for.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Strong overall performance
- Good value for money
- Excellent endurance

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / **CONTROLLER:** PHISON PS5016-E16 / **MEMORY:** TOSHIBA 3D TLC / **INTERFACE:** M.2 PCIE 4.0 X4 / **SEQ. READ:** 5,000MB/S / **SEQ. WRITE:** 4,400MB/S

MP600 1TB

80

CORSAIR **$299**

A next-gen drive that offers good value for money

6 This Corsair SSD was one of the first PCIe 4.0 drives to appear, with AMD grabbing a bunch of these (and the Gigabyte ones) to ship out with the first review samples of its Zen 2 processors. That was a year and a half ago now, but these drives are still going strong and offering decent value for money thanks to some keen price cuts.

Newer drives have scraped a bit more out of the Phison controller and the NAND flash, which is why this SSD is slightly lower down the list, but it's still a quality offering. The fact that this ships with a big heatsink can work in its favour too, although make sure there's room for it on your motherboard, as Corsair doesn't recommend removing the cooler in order to slot it under any cooling offered by your motherboard, as it runs a bit hot.

It is inexpensive for a 1TB drive, and is also faster than any PCIe 3.0 SSD around. There are more affordable versions on their way, and potentially faster ones too, but this one is here today.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Decent next-gen performance
- Great value for money
- Integrated heatsink

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / **CONTROLLER:** PHISON PS5016-E16 / **MEMORY:** TOSHIBA 3D TLC / **INTERFACE:** M.2 PCIE 4.0 X4 / **SEQ. READ:** 4,950MB/S / **SEQ. WRITE:** 4,250MB/S

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Hagionaut

GAMING'S LINEAGES EXPLORED

It's shocking to see an *Assassin's Creed* game where the protagonist is an unlikable dick

The bird analogies are strong in *AC1*.

ASSASSIN'S CREED

Novel ideas save Altaïr from falling on his face. *By Joseph Knoop*

According to *Assassin's Creed*, the fine people of Damascus, Jerusalem and Acre only had about three lines of employment: carrying breakable vases on their heads, accosting citizens accused of petty crimes, or just getting 30 miles a day in on their medieval Fitbits. It's a far cry from the endless realms of *Valhalla*, *Odyssey* and *Origins*.

The original *Assassin's Creed* cares not for your RPG mechanics, however, fixating almost solely on exploring the world of the Crusades, collecting intel, and assassinating nine Templar leaders. I've contended for years that its brand of social stealth was where the franchise ought to have focused, rather than going bigger and bigger with each successive entry. I may have been wrong, though.

From the get-go, it's shocking to see an *Assassin's Creed* game where the protagonist is an unlikable dick. Future entries lived and died by how popular the player character was, and Altaïr is nothing short of a murderous bad boy. Within minutes of knowing him, he stabs an innocent old man in the back, gets one accomplice killed and the other dismembered, and mouths off to his elder like a teething child. When one of Altaïr's fellow assassins chides him for an unnecessary murder, saying "this is not the way," Altaïr responds with "my way is better," which sounds like a phrase you'd see on your 12-year-old cousin's T-shirt.

It doesn't help that Altaïr's voice actor could still land a Razzie by most modern standards. For a game that starts off with the trademark disclaimer about the team's multicultural makeup, hearing a distinctly American voice come out of an ancient Syrian feels like a weird betrayal of that commitment. To be fair, actor Philip Shahbaz is Iranian-American, but little of that identity seems to come through in Altaïr's progression as a character, which unconvincingly transitions from sour grape to remorseful curmudgeon with all the grace of a dead Templar.

Midway through his redemption, Altaïr's leader asks him how he knew he wouldn't kill him as punishment for screwing up. Altaïr's answer is simply, "I took a leap of faith". Woof. To its credit, the ultimate twist of *Assassin's Creed*'s plot (Altaïr's mentor is corrupted by the mystical Apple of Eden, throwing the implied benevolence of the assassin brotherhood into disarray) massively pays off throughout the rest of the

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
November 13, 2007

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Montreal

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

LINK
bit.ly/3o8MYzE

Spot the bad guy.

Not suspicious, not suspicious at all!

That horse looks blitzed, bro.

series. We like to harp on Ubisoft for being 'apolitical' with its storytelling, but the historical fiction of the Assassin vs Templar wars has provided for plenty of multilayered characters and motivations without it feeling like 'both sides' stupidity. Knowing the Brotherhood is fallible, makes its victories and failures that much more meaningful.

SIDE DISHES

Assassin's Creed's strongest portions to this day remain the assassinations themselves. To get to them, though, you have to slog through a city's side missions, which include identical tasks like pickpocketing, beating up rabble rousers in alleys, or rooftop running time trials. That's it for variety, and the inclusion of hundreds of collectible flags doesn't help, but I did appreciate that reconnaissance missions actually gave me a small piece of intel that could, in theory, play into my final assassination.

An early bit of investigation led me to discover that my target, a Templar surgeon in charge of a ward full of mentally ill people, often focuses on his patients to the detriment of his immediate surroundings, making him an easier target. It's nowhere near the depth of more immersive games, like stumbling upon some casual cannibalism in a *Fallout 3* town, but it does give you a little more familiarity with your target. Not enough to feel anything terribly personal towards them, but that's where another part of *Assassin's Creed* comes in to play.

Though these days it feels like Ubisoft is more known for huge open worlds, it's impossible to miss how *Assassin's Creed* influenced the arc of post-2007 storytelling. Each assassination mission kicks off with a cinematic introduction to your target just as you walk up, almost never ripping away from your perspective. When Altaïr finally plunges the good ol' wrist-blade into his back, players are treated to a sort of side-stage conversation between the two. Each victim gets their monologue, ripping into Altaïr with the bravado you'd expect of a villain, but also with the genuine grief that he could not see the world the way they did.

Though future entries did it with more flair, it's striking that *Assassin's Creed* was confident enough in its storytelling to sow seeds of doubt in

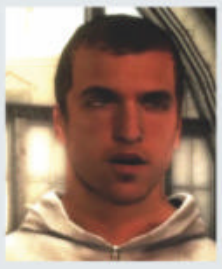
BEHIND THE HOOD

Assassin's Creed's *surprisingly notable actors*

KRISTEN BELL

Voices: Lucy Stillman

Seen in: Frozen, The Good Place, Veronica Mars



NOLAN NORTH

Voices: Desmond

Seen in: *Uncharted, Destiny, The Last Of Us*

PHIL PROCTOR

Voices: Warren Vidic

Seen in: Monsters Inc, Tarzan, Rugrats

The crowd loves a show.

UBISOFT ASSIGNED EACH SIDE OF YOUR BODY TO YOUR CONTROLLER'S FACE BUTTONS

its player. But what is a narrative without a world to tell it in? It's crazy to think that Ubisoft believed it could get away with designing three major cities, an assassin village and a sizeable overworld connecting it all.

CITY SLICKER

And you know, Ubisoft didn't get away with it. Despite Jerusalem, Damascus and Acre being very different regions, each city feels bereft of cultural signifiers besides one or two notable landmarks, like the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem or the port in Acre. Even worse, each city was seemingly built by the same architect, each building a basic square or triangle as if shunted into place like a Lego block rather than naturally layered over the years. This makes each place feel far too similar to the last.

I wonder too how confident Ubisoft was in its climbing tech at the time, considering Altaïr gets tripped by anything other than a 90-degree angle. There's nothing quite like leaping over three support beams, swinging through a merchant's stand with some impeccable animation, and eagle-diving into some hay.

Consider me still very impressed by the controls, where Ubisoft assigned each side of your body to your controller's face buttons. It forces you to be conscious of how you're using your body in the moment, be it to shove a man out of the way or sidle around his guard. Nowadays, even *Valhalla* relies on a fairly standard light and heavy attack system that only considers your body when it's time to dual-wield shields.

Then there's the overworld that connects the cities, a large yet surprisingly linear procession of huts and military camps bookmarked only by more towers to climb. It's weird because it shows the scope of Ubisoft's ambition years before it would really nail it. I'd wager it was meant to house much more to do, but instead we just get some innocuous horseback riding.

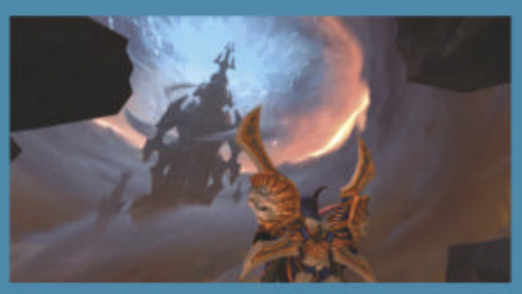
There's also a number of NPCs that haven't aged well, including the homeless people exhibiting signs of mental illness who violently shove you, or the small army of beggars that always happen to be women. To Ubisoft's credit, the cast is well-rounded with (mostly male) actors representative of each region.

I realise I've spent much of this ragging on *Assassin's Creed*, but it's easy to see why this franchise took off the way it did, save for a few resets. *Hitman* was already on the scene as a sort of social stealth experience, but *Assassin's Creed* was truly a next-gen horsepower showcase, and it wasn't afraid to show that off. The camera is closer to the player, more intimate, and not so much the typical third person of recent tries. The pacing is nowhere near the breakneck speed of *Valhalla*, but to see Middle Eastern cities realised so expansively was groundbreaking for the time.

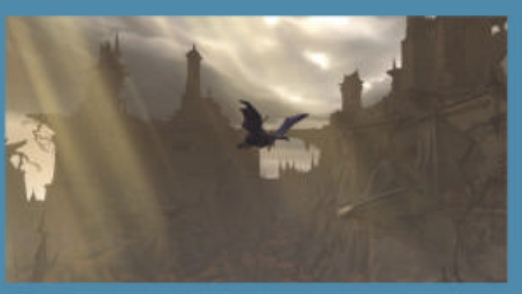
Assassin's Creed is a testament to Ubisoft's strengths as a studio, where scope was just a word and every gamer's natural instinct for historical murder tourism can be explored with some genuine zeal. Altaïr may be a fumbling mess at many times, but he walked so we could run. ■

THE LAUNCH OF A NEW WORLD OF WARCRAFT EXPANSION

A clean slate and a new adventure makes *WoW* exciting again. ***Steven Messner***



LEFT: I'm going to miss this view from *Battle for Azeroth*.



As I am writing these words *World of Warcraft: Shadowlands*, its eighth expansion, is just a few hours from its official launch. I'll soon get to embark on a whole new adventure to entirely new realms filled with entirely new enemies, characters to meet and bosses to grind for loot. It is, without a doubt, the most excited I've felt about *World of Warcraft* in a long time, and it's a feeling that I've come to cherish over the 16 years I've been playing.

It's easy to see why the launch of any new MMO expansion would be exciting, but there's something extra special about *World of Warcraft*'s modern approach to it. Sure, there's new zones and story quests to explore, but I'm far more enticed by *Shadowlands*' new progression systems and endgame structure. A lot of MMO expansions go for the more is better approach – *Final Fantasy XIV*, for example, sticks to a template that rarely changes between expansions. The story might be different, but I know that eventually I'll hit the new level cap and start grinding dungeons for a currency that I'll exchange for gear. It works, but it's predictable.

World of Warcraft, on the other hand, takes a far riskier approach. Though Blizzard iterates on features and systems, only a few survive the launch of the expansion wholly intact. Most are diced up and blended together with new inspirations to create something entirely new. Sometimes the results sucks, as with *Battle for Azeroth*'s lackluster Warfronts that tried to capture the strategy of *Warcraft III* battles but ended up feeling like a repetitive slog. But sometimes this approach yields unexpectedly awesome ideas. And having spent a little time playing the expansion on the beta servers, I can safely say *Shadowlands* has more than a few of these.

Torghast, for example, is an entirely new type of dungeon that is basically a roguelike built into *Warcraft*. Floors are randomly generated assortments of puzzles and combat encounters, and players frequently earn wild, new powers as they climb to more dangerous levels. And that's just one of half a dozen new features coming in *Shadowlands*.

ZONING OUT

To be fair, this kind of evolution also happens during an expansion's lifetime, too. *Battle for Azeroth* also added new zones and ways to power up or individualise my character, but all of those were also bound to the overarching themes of *Battle for Azeroth*'s story. *Shadowlands*, though, is a completely different story in a completely different corner of *Warcraft*'s universe. Instead of dinosaurs and pirates, I get to play a *World of Warcraft* flavoured by its different shades of heaven and hell as I cross over into its afterlife.

In a few hours, *World of Warcraft* will feel like a significantly different game. That's a very welcome change considering I've spent over two years playing with the same systems in the current *Battle for Azeroth* expansion.

It's difficult to overstate how important that novelty is. For the first time in several years, I won't have the layout of the new main city memorised. I won't have every dungeon and their associated boss fights memorised so thoroughly I could probably run them blindfolded. I won't know where to get the best loot, or how to quickly travel from one area to the next. For a brief couple of weeks *Shadowlands* will feel alien to me. I want to savour that moment for as long as I can.

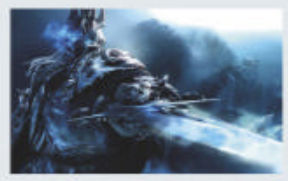
FOR A BRIEF COUPLE OF WEEKS SHADOWLANDS WILL FEEL ALIEN TO ME

It's kind of incredible to feel this way about a game that's this old, but *World of Warcraft* has an uncanny knack for building distinct worlds while still feeling coherent. Coupled with Blizzard's risky decision to reinvent the wheel with each expansion makes the launch of a new one incredibly exciting and liberating. Out with the old, in with the new. ■

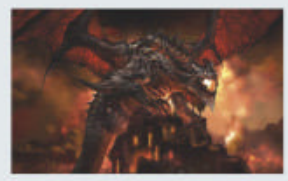
TL;DR

If you didn't play them, here's a quick summary of each WoW expansion

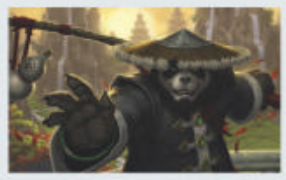
THE BURNING CRUSADE
Go back through the Dark Portal because demons.



WRATH OF THE LICH KING
Remember Arthas? We should finish him off.



CATACLYSM
Someone woke up a dragon and now everything is on fire.



MISTS OF PANDARIA
A continent of pandas floating on a giant turtle.

WARLORDS OF DRAENOR
The Dark Portal now becomes a time portal.

LEGION
Hey wow, we found a lost island, and it's full of demons, obviously.

BATTLE FOR AZEROTH
Horde vs Alliance and, oh wait, demons are back.

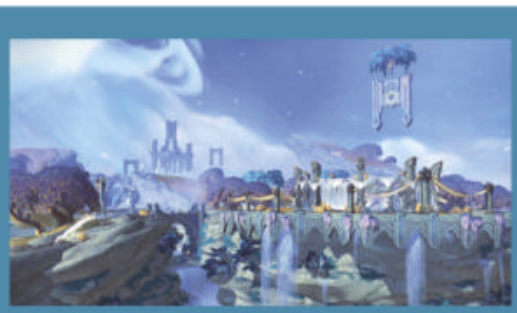
NEED TO KNOW

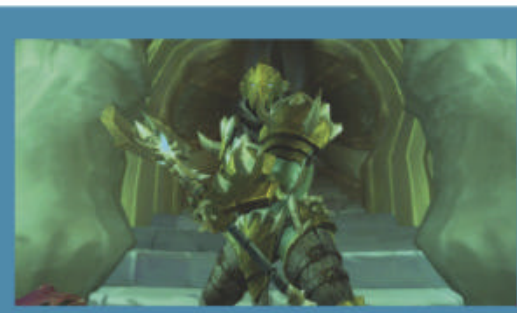
RELEASED
November 23, 2004

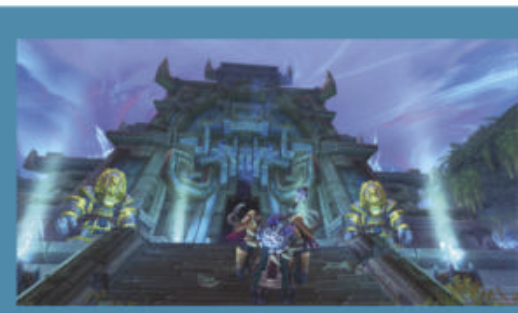
EXPECT TO PAY
$19.95 per month

OUR REVIEW
94%

LINK
worldofwarcraft.com







LEFT: *Shadowlands* has some really gorgeous vistas.

Coming soon

Next Issue

ISSUE 286 ON SALE

19.04.2021

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